

His Dark Empire

Tears of Blood, Book One

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Published by Quirky Algorithms
Smashwords Edition

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CHAPTER ONE

Aren

The arrow thunked into the broad trunk of the giant redwood, only inches from Aren's head. It had been close, so close that he could feel the sharp cut of the air around it, and hear the whistle of the feathers passing by. Aren leaned forward and dug his heels harder into the roan's flanks. The horse gave its all to forge ahead, but it had been born and raised for farming, not outrunning death.

"Come on, Tisha," he cried, eyes filled with a mixture of sweat and tears. "Please."

They pounded through the brush, trampling a new path in the dense wood, each smack of Tisha's hooves leading Aren in a new prayer that the horse wouldn't find herself stepping on a loose stone, or tripping over a fallen tree branch.

"You never should have run."

He could hear the voice in the wind, in the air around him, and in his mind. Gathering courage, he decided to chance a look back, to see if he could spot the soldiers chasing him. The glint of sunlight off a metal helm showed him their position. They were gaining.

"We could have helped you, if you hadn't run."

Aren swallowed, his throat nearly clenching from the dryness. He heard the thunk of another arrow, and saw the fletching protruding from the redwood to his right. His heart beat a rhythm of panic in his chest, and he did his best to block out the voices surrounding him.

"We could have helped you," they said. "You have the curse. We would have cared for

you."

"No!" Aren shouted. He dared lift his hands from Tisha's neck to squeeze them over his head. Except the voices weren't traveling through his ears. They were everywhere, and they were nowhere, and there was no escaping them.

"You had to run. You had to defy us. It is a waste. Such a waste."

Aren jerked as Tisha bunched and leaped over a fallen log, causing him to nearly lose his grip. He dropped his hands from his ears and wrapped them tight around her neck again when she landed with a splash, her wild run taking them to a wide, shallow, stream. It was a place far afield from anywhere he had ever ventured before. A place he could die, and never be found.

He counted heartbeats while he waited to hear the echoing splash of the soldier's chargers. If his heart hadn't been beating so fast, he might not have even reached five. They were gaining.

Aren heeled into his horse once more. She had never run so hard for so long in all of her fourteen years, and yet somehow she found more energy, more speed, more power in those legs that were muscle hardened to drag a till, not to outrun *his* soldiers.

The water flew out behind them, hooves finding slippery purchase on the smooth stones below the surface. An arrow hissed by, further off the mark this time, landing in the water a dozen yards ahead. Aren guided Tisha to the right, a sharp hook that moved them perpendicular to the soldiers and brought them into denser brush; brush that was better protection from arrows. The soldier's heavy chargers couldn't turn as fast, and he could hear them cursing as they slowed to change direction.

"You should never have run." The voices returned, forceful in their anger, their sadness, their pity. "We could have helped you. You should never have run."

"Be quiet," Aren shouted, his words echoing in the forest, reverberating off the trees and bouncing from ancient glacial stones.

The scream startled Tisha for just an instant, her desire to please her master faltering beneath the loud tone of his words. At a full gallop through heavy foliage, a startled instant was all it took.

He felt the break before he heard it. One step and her gait was smooth, the next, and it was lost. A loud crack created a new echo, replaced again by the combined screams of horse and rider as they were both thrown forward.

Time and direction lost meaning. The world slowed, and Aren watched with fascination as it happened. He saw Tisha begin to drop below him, her newly broken front leg buckling under the weight of their bodies. He saw himself raising higher, the momentum carrying his body upward and outward. He looked upon every branch and leaf in utter detail, every crack and crevice of skin and vein. He thought of her, while he tumbled. He remembered her, and he began to cry.

Time had slowed for Aren, but there was no time for tears. Tisha vanished beneath him, crashing headlong into a moss covered stone, stopping in an instant with a sickening crunch. The stone wasn't quite wide enough to claim him, though he felt the fire in his shoulder when it struck the immovable object, twisting and twirling him, sending him heels over head. He landed roughly on his back, feeling it too ignite in fire while he gazed up into the density of the forest canopy, searching for the blue sky above.

Laying there, time regained itself. The pain was enough to make him groan, and a single tear dropped from his eye. He heard the snorting of tired horses, slowed to a careful trot in order to navigate past the obstacle that had cost his horse her life. The obstacle that would cost him his.

There was a creak of leather, and the clank of chain, the lightly armored soldiers sliding off their mounts. Two sets of footfalls, the breaking of branch and twig. They would be upon him soon.

There was nothing but cold fire, the sharp, throbbing intensity of broken bones that shouldn't have allowed Aren to rise, and yet he did. He turned on his knee to face his attackers, to face *his* soldiers. They were nondescript beneath their steel helmets; two pairs of brown eyes, two days worth of growth on their chins, thick lips and strong builds. They wore the black chain he was expecting, covered by a black leather doublet bearing *his* mark, a red eye, the bottom waved and distorted so that it looked like it was crying. Crying blood.

"You shouldn't have run," the soldier on the right said. Aren decided to call him Right.

"You're a traitor," the other one said. Left.

He could have tried begging, but his pleas would have been ignored. He could have offered coin, or land, or things of a more personal nature, but there was no bribe that would convince the soldiers to let him flee. They were controlled by something more powerful than any bribe. They were driven by fear.

Aren knew it, and so he didn't beg. He had been driven by fear too. It had been that fear that had caused him to run, to try to escape from the soldiers when they had come for him. It had been that fear that had led him to the forest where he had never tread, his horse lying dead ten feet away, his own life about to end. The voices were right, he should never have run.

His body was broken, but he found the will and strength to stand, rising before Left and Right, holding his arms out wide. He offered his body to them. He offered a target for their swords to skewer. He should never have run.

Left pulled longsword from scabbard with a soft *schnikt*, while Right notched another

arrow to his bow. He was broken and beaten, and yet they still approached with caution. Aren's eyes narrowed, and in the corner of his eye he found the sun.

He should never have run, he decided. He should have stood and fought.

Left was too slow. He didn't even see Aren's hand when it shot forward, sinking into his flesh and wrapping itself around his heart. His eyes traced Aren's wrist to the unbroken armor, and he screamed in fear and pain when the hand was removed, his life's muscle still pumping in it. Aren dropped it to the floor, but Left hit the ground first.

He turned to Right, who had found himself suddenly blinded by sunlight, despite the thick growth of the forest. He couldn't see to train his bow, and he still couldn't see when the bow was wrenched from his hands and the north end used to puncture his vulnerable throat. He too tumbled to the earth, blind in a sea of light.

Aren began to cough, his lungs filling with blood. A moment more, and he wouldn't have been able to speak the incantation, too softly for them to hear. He fell back to his knees. A moment more, a wish for just a slice of time; time to see her big bright eyes, time to see her toothless smile. Time to tell her he loved her, and he was sorry. He reached into a pocket, searching for the ring, but it was gone. He knew he must have lost it when he was thrown from the horse.

He never should have run, but he had been afraid. Afraid of what would happen to her, if they had known that she was his. Afraid that she would become *his*, if her luck was as poor as his own. They had discovered one of his secrets, but there were two more that he would take to his grave.

"You never should have run." The voice was there now, focused on a singular spot, a spot where a man now stood. He wasn't a soldier, but that didn't mean he wasn't a threat. Aren's eyes

were growing dim, but he was able to see well enough to make out the bleeding red crystal eye that clasped the man's nightmare black cloak at his throat.

"You never should have followed," Aren wanted to say, but all that came out were gurgles, and so he spat the mouthful of blood at the Mediator's feet. He knew that Right's arrow had fallen nearby, and his hand moved slowly, searching the grass for it.

The Mediator came closer, revealing his boyish face, a face too young to be so cold. "We would have cared for you," he said. "We would have treated you like a brother."

I had a brother, Aren thought. He had been cursed in sword and bow. *He* had taken him for *his* own. That was why he had chosen the wheat and the udder. Better to hide your curse.

Aren's hand found the arrow, and he carefully wrapped his fingers around it, rolling it into his palm. The Mediator came closer still, reaching to his waist and lifting a polished metal blade from a simple rope loop at his hip. He took one step closer, and then another, and then another.

Aren wasn't a violent man, and he wasn't a warrior. He was a farmer with secrets. One had been discovered, the others he was desperate to protect. With his last surge of strength, Aren threw his hand forward, intent on putting the arrow tip into the Mediator's stomach. It had only cleared the grass when it exploded into splinters that lodged themselves in his hand.

"I'm sorry," the Mediator said, drawing back his blade. His left hand was balled into a fist through which a gold light filtered.

You will be, Aren thought. Death had made him angry and cold. He tried to move, to fight, and found himself held in place by unseen bindings. The last thing he saw was the sunlight reflecting from the perfect, lustrous alloy of the sword.

The Mediator stood over the farmer, staring down at the space between the body and the

head. A single tear welled from his eye; a tear the deep, rich, red of his blood.

CHAPTER TWO

Eryn

"Come on Eryn," Mother shouted, standing at the base of the ladder that led into their small cottage's attic. "Papa will be home soon, and he'll be hungry like a monster from smithing all day."

Eryn rolled her eyes. Papa was hungry like a monster whether he worked the forge all day or not. Even on his day away from the sweltering heat of fire and metal he would still tear through a roasted duck and a bowl of berry porridge like it was going to run away from him.

She was standing at the top step of an unsteady stool, trying to reach the furthest corner of their elevated pantry, where the last bag of the salt they would use to flavor the duck sat mocking her reach. If only she were just a little bit taller.

Of course, there was nothing she could do about that. Her father was the tall one, and she was merely of average height for a girl of fourteen, though she did possess a lean strength that had come from many days of begging her father to tag along with him to his shop in Watertown's square.

"If you're going to come to work with me, you're going to come to work," her father had said.

She had been eager to agree, and had surprised her father, both in her effort to keep him supplied with the iron he used to make horseshoes and scythe blades for the farmers, and for asking to return with him on future days.

"You will be a strong young lady," he had said with a laugh. "But mind you don't work too hard. Few boys will want a wife that can lift more grain than they can."

Eryn smiled at the thought. She had taken his advice to heart, and only gone to the smithy with him on odd days, staying home with mother and learning the ways of the household on the evens. Which was why she was standing on the top of a rickety old step stool, struggling to reach that last bag of salt. If her father was to be believed, she was growing into a very pretty young lady, despite the fact that she favored doeskin pants and loose homespun blouses to skirts, and kept her hair cut to her shoulders so it wouldn't get burned at the forge.

"I've almost got it," she called down to her mother.

She steadied herself on the stool, and leaned forward again, trying to judge the distance, the shiftiness of her platform, and the weight of the bag. She knew she should be able to reach it, after all she had put it there at the beginning of the year, and she had surely grown at least a smidgeon since then. Still, the salt evaded her, leaving it in her mind that perhaps Roddin had snuck up while they were sleeping and shifted everything back. He liked to play tricks like that.

"Hurry, my love," Mother said. "You know if we don't salt it in time, Papa will bellyache about the flavor."

"Papa always bellyaches about the flavor," she replied. "It's too salty, it's not salty enough, the skin is too crunchy, the skin isn't crunchy enough."

He always found something wrong with the duck, but it was more of a rolling humor than a serious complaint.

Eryn stretched out one last time, sighing with the effort, but falling just short. The tips of her fingers touched the edge of the bag, and then she felt herself losing her balance and was forced to shift her weight back. "By Amman," she said under her breath. Papa would have

scolded her if he'd heard her speak so.

She turned her head and looked back at the daylight rising through the small opening to the attic, feeling her heart begin to beat faster. She knew she could get the bag of salt. She knew how to retrieve it even though it was beyond her grasp.

She also knew she was forbidden.

Eryn had been twelve when she and her family had first discovered that she was Cursed. It had been a total accident, as the discovery usually was. She had just been fortunate that only her family had witnessed it, or she would have been locked up within the hour, and they would have been summoned to their small village. *His* soldiers, the frightening men who patrolled every corner of every province in search of the Cursed, to take them away from their families, never to be seen again. It had seemed unfair to her, but *he* was the Emperor, and all were *his* subjects. They had no choice, and no say.

They had been having a picnic, way out in the Whistling Woods on a beautiful spring day. Papa had loaded his cart with food and drink for once, instead of ingot and hammer and wood. He had guided them through the lighter part of the brush to a wide, shallow stream that divided a gigantic field of grass and wild flowers. They had eaten and drank, played games like hide and find, and Papa had even shown her how to draw a bow and loose an arrow. It had been the perfect day.

It *had* been the perfect day, until they had loaded up the cart and started making their way back home. What was a bright, cool, sunny spring day turned dark as heavy clouds moved in,

and before long the wind had picked up and a steady rain began to fall, soaking them all to the bone. They didn't really mind being wet, in fact she and Roddin had enjoyed jumping in the newly created puddles that were born in the cratered earth of the woods. If that had been the end of it, their lives could have continued as before.

It had been a flash of lightning, and a tremendous clap of thunder that had startled their horse, Maxin. He had snorted and reared back, then launched forward like one of the arrows they had been loosing earlier. It would have been easy enough to let him race his way back home, except she and Roddin had been out in front of the old stallion, jumping in the puddles and playing tag. It was Roddin who'd found himself in the frightened horse's path.

She could still see it clearly in her mind. Papa's booming voice roaring out her brother's name in warning. Mother's shrill cry of alarm at seeing her child in harm's way. Eryn herself saw the horse before Roddin did, and out of nothing more than instinct she had wished her brother would move from here to there.

It had felt strange then. A tingling sensation that had started behind her ears and ran down her back and chest to her arms. Of their own volition they shot out straight towards Roddin, and the air in front of him began to wiggle and squirm. She saw Roddin's hair get blown to the side as though he were caught in a mighty wind, and then his whole body had been lifted up and thrown aside, only moments before Maxin rushed by with the cart.

They had run to him then, Mother and Papa, with Mother leaning down and wrapping her arms around her older child. Eryn had been too stunned to move, and she stood as still as she could while her arms dropped to her sides and the tingling sensation faded. She realized then that she was crying, and she brought up one of her arms to wipe away the rain and the tears. When she pulled her arm away, she saw that it was streaked with blood.

Papa had seen it too, she remembered, and he had rushed over to her and held her tight and cried. She didn't know why he was crying, not at first. She had been too young to pay much attention to the stories about the Cursed. In time, they had told her that she must never tell anyone what had happened that night, and that she must never let her ears tingle like that again.

It had been an easy promise to make at the time, but a much harder one to keep in the two years that had followed. After all, how could it be a Curse when she had used it to save her brother's life? How could it be bad when it was so useful? She had gone out to the edge of the Whistling Woods on her own when nobody expected her to be anywhere in particular. She had tried again and again to make her ears tingle, and to feel the energy rushing through her body. It had taken weeks of trying, but eventually she made it happen once, and then again. It was never as strong as when she had pushed Roddin out of Maxin's path, but it was enough to do little things.

Like move a bag of salt just a tiny bit closer.

CHAPTER THREE

Silas

Silas Morningstar lifted the mug of ale to his chin, and then tilted his head to peer down into its depths.

"Almost gone," he mumbled to himself, shaking the mug so the dark amber liquid inside would shift and swirl.

Silas watched every rise and fall of the remainder of his drink, considering the movement of swirling ale, and the patterns of the resulting waves. "To a fair lady lost at sea," he said, a little louder than intended.

"Hey Silas, I didn't know you had a fair lady?"

Wenley Hollow was the proprietor of the Sleepy Hollow, a small inn and tavern in the town of Root. He was a small man with a large appetite, and a burgeoning belly to match it. He laughed at his own sense of humor while he dried a fresh mug with a less than fresh cloth.

"Only a fool would know," Silas mumbled. His head felt heavy. His eyes felt heavy. He kept staring into the ale. "Is there any sense in cups?" he asked nobody. He brought the mug to his mouth, and took his final swallow. "I'll have another," he called out to Wenley.

"A copper a cup," Wenley replied.

Silas grumbled and got to his feet. His somewhat unsteady feet. He reached into his pants, feeling around for the hidden pocket where he kept his coin.

"Where is it?" he whispered to himself. He felt a little sick. "It has to be here, I haven't

changed my pants in..." He tried to remember. He only had one pair of pants. When had he last brought them down to the river to soak? When had he last brought himself down to the river to soak?

He squirmed and twisted while he searched the inner lining for the pocket. "To Heden with it," he cursed.

"No coin, no courtesy," Wenley said, walking over to him. "If you can't pay for another round, you're going to have to leave."

Silas took a deep breath, sucking the air in through a congested nose. "I can pay you in a fortnight," he said. "Or I can pay with a song."

Wenley shook his head. "I took you up on the song once, remember, Silas? I should have known you had the singing voice of an ogre, and lyrics that made as much sense as their howls." He reached out to take Silas by the arm. "You're lucky I even let you come in here, as bad as you smell."

Silas looked around. It was barely mid-morning. He and Wenley were the only two in the tavern.

"You've been a good friend to me," Silas said, his voice rough and raw. "A good friend."

Wenley reached out and put his hand under Silas' shoulder. "I'm not your friend, Silas," Wenley replied. "I'm running a business. I let you in because I'm here to clean and get the place ready, and it's harmless enough to watch you sit there and mutter to yourself. When you have coin. Which you don't. So now you need to leave."

"I can pay you in a fortnight," Silas said again. "Or I can pay you with a song."

Wenley gripped Silas' arm a little tighter, and pulled on him. It wasn't as simple a task as it could have been, because Silas was almost two heads taller. "Come on, old man. Go find a

hole to fall into to sleep it off. Or better yet, go down to the Baden and throw yourself in it."

Silas didn't resist Wenley's tug. He let the man drag him out from behind his chair. "I can wash dishes," he suggested, losing his balance. Wenley's grip was the only thing that kept him from falling to the floor.

"I've never seen you right enough to handle dishes," he said, "and you've been coming around for almost two years."

"On a morning bright, in lighter days. Or is it, on a morning light in brighter days?" Silas looked up at the beams of wood supporting the three floors of rooms above them, and then down at the smooth planked floor. The motion made him dizzy, and the dizziness made his stomach churn. He felt bubbling in his throat, and heard the sounds of his body rejecting the ale.

"Out. Out right now," Wenley urged. He knew what those sounds meant, and he tugged harder on the older man.

Silas shook off the man's arm and rushed himself outside. The streets were quiet at this time of day, and there was a light fog that the sun had yet to burn off. It worked out to his advantage. Nobody else saw him duck around the side of the Sleepy Hollow, to a narrow alley between the tavern and a seamstress' shop. He vomited on the seamstress' wall.

"That was disgusting," he announced to nobody in a deep sing-song voice. He supported himself by resting his head against the wall, and he gazed down into the muck of his regurgitated drink. He stared at it, looking for patterns in the foam.

"To a fair lady lost at sea," he said again.

Silas pushed himself away from the wall and headed back towards the street. His legs still felt like rubber beneath him, and his head was throbbing, but he'd decided he would follow his

friend's advice and head down to the river. He stepped back out onto the empty street, turning left and crossing over towards the town square.

The center of town was known to the locals as the Root Bazaar. It was a massive open space that was cut in half by the Baden river, over which two wood and iron bridges arched. Both sides of the space were used for an assortment of purposes like celebrations, games, and tournaments, though the west bank was often called the Red Bank, because that was where they held the executions.

Each side of the square was closed in by tightly spaced storefronts and taverns, with a few dirt roads that crossed them, and a single cobblestone road on the Red Bank that led from the north gate to the south gate. It was early yet, but there was already a collection of traveling merchants randomly spotted on the grass on both sides of the river, unpacking their wares and putting them up on display.

Being the largest town between the cities of Killorn and Elling, and a hub from the villages surrounding the Baden and its tributaries, Root spent nearly every day each year hosting traders, performers, and nobles on their way to and from the seat of the province's Overlord. Such transient wealth also meant there was a strong presence of less than honorable professions. Silas wasn't always an honest man, but he also wasn't the type to belong to any of those guilds.

Even so, the merchants kept a close eye on Silas as he walked by. Whenever he came too close to one, they would move to stand in front of their wares, and wrinkle their noses at the smell of him. It wasn't that they didn't trust him in particular, but there was something suspicious about a haggard man who couldn't walk in a straight line, wandering past them at this time of day.

Silas reached the cobblestone road and turned north. Using the river from inside of the

city walls was forbidden and punishable by death, as most offenses were under *his* rule. Root himself had a clay pipeline that led from a diverted basin to various sections of the town, where the inhabitants could go and pay for access to water from which to bathe and drink. As he had no way to pay, he had no choice but to walk.

He sobered up somewhat as he traveled, staying to the outer reaches of the main thoroughfare where it split around the Constable's Office. The office was the seat of Root's governor, Constable Penticott. It was a large, ornately columned, two-story building that sat in an area roughly half the size of the square, and was surrounded by an incredible botanical garden, which itself was surrounded by a tall iron fence. The garden was there to prevent any from being able to view *his* soldiers, out training in the yard, as the office was home not only to the Constable, but also two hundred of *his* soldiers and the Root dungeons. There was another barracks on the south side of the Baden's east bank, which housed another two hundred.

"So many soldiers," Silas said to himself as he walked past, trying to avoid being noticed by the guards positioned around the gate. "Who are they fighting against?" As far as he knew, there had been no war and no uprisings in at least forty years. It was true that some of the soldiers were needed to keep the peace within the city walls, but a soldier for every ten inhabitants seemed excessive to him. Even if Silas added the travelers passing through the town, it still appeared too many.

It took him nearly two hours of walking to reach a secluded spot on the Baden, giving him more than enough time to shake the effects of the ale. His head began to throb, and his eyes were blurry from lack of sleep. Silas tried to remember the last time he had been completely sober.

"It was probably the last time I bathed," he said to himself with a chuckle.

He made his way down to the edge of the Baden, and then lifted his stained white shirt over his head and brought it to his face, sniffing under the arms and drawing back in disgust. He took hold of his pants and removed them as well, though he declined to check on their cleanliness. Last, he bent down and removed the simple leather sandals that cradled his feet.

"A fine day," Silas announced, stretching out his naked body and letting it catch as much of the cool morning air as it could. The sun was rising in the sky, and by afternoon it would be blasting Root with its intensity, so he needed to enjoy the crispness while it lasted. He shifted his neck from one side to the other, satisfied with the resulting crunch, and then bent over and reached his hands to his toes. More cracks ran along his entire back, his elbows and his knees. Finally, he leaned over and looked down into the calm flow of the Baden.

He was confused by what he saw. White hair grown long, a thick white mustache and beard attached to a long, narrow, chiseled face. His body was equally long and thin, though he had managed to maintain some definition in his muscles, even after the years.

"When did that happen?" he asked himself.

He ran his hand along his torso, where a jagged scar cut its way from his right pectoral to his left hip. Try as he might, he couldn't recall ever being so grievously wounded. Had the drink made him forget? Or did he drink to forget? Or had he forgotten long before he started drinking?

He didn't know, and when he thought more about it, he realized he didn't care. He decided that he would clean himself up a little, and with any luck be in right enough shape to convince Wenley to let him wash dishes. Failing that, he would see if he could find some purses to lighten. The penalty for stealing was hard labor in the ore mines, not death, and anyway he was an exceptional thief. If only he could remember where he had learned the skill.

"Am I not in right shape?" he asked himself, staring down at his reflection.

"You haven't been in right shape in years," his reflection answered back. Or maybe it hadn't. Maybe it was all in his head. He wasn't sure. All he did know was that he needed a drink.

"Now or never," he said. He gathered his clothes into a ball in his arms, took a few steps back, and then ran forward and leaped into the river. He shouted at the shock of the cold water greeting him, and then began to laugh. He had forgotten how much he liked to swim.

He cavorted in the water for a while, holding his clothes in each hand as he dove under, swam on his back, and paddled upstream and downstream. He was hopeful that the motion would help pull some of the stink out of the cloth, his hair, and his body.

As it was, the play led him to distraction of his own, and before he realized it he was much further downstream than he had intended. Silas planted his feet in the soft mud of a shallow spot in the river and stood up, the water climbing up to his chest. He spun around in a circle, trying to figure out where he was, but not recognizing the location. He had gone way too far.

"Momma, what's going to happen to me?"

He heard the voice of a boy, and turned his head to find it.

"Nothing, dear. Nothing is going to happen to you." A woman's voice. His mother, Silas assumed. He still wasn't sure where it was coming from.

"I'm scared," the boy said.

Silas saw movement through trees on the west side of the river. The boy and his mother were in a small copse of trees, near the furthest edge of the farmlands surrounding Root. He had definitely gone way, way too far.

"I'm scared too."

Silas creased his brow, wondering what they were talking about. He decided he wanted to

know, so he swam over to the shore and carefully pulled himself out of the water. He left his clothes on the banks and slithered his way across the ground like a snake, getting himself covered in dirt and grass with the effort. Finally, he reached the trees.

"You aren't going to tell them?" the boy asked.

"I could never do that to you," came the reply. "I love you too much to let *him* take you."

Silas' ears perked up even more at *his* mention. He pushed himself to his feet, and snuck across to the trunk of a wide oak tree. He peeked his head around the corner, able to see the two people who were talking now. He was shocked to find that he recognized them. He was even more shocked when he saw the boy's face. He had tried to wipe it away, but there was still a smudge of red right below his right eye. He was Cursed.

"Are you going to tell Da?" Calum asked.

"No," his mother, Selene replied. "Every person who knows is one more person who can betray you. This is our secret, and we'll take it to our graves."

Silas knew Selene and Calum. She was a waitress at the Old Oak, a tavern on the other side of town from the Sleepy Hollow. He had spent plenty of hours over there, losing himself in his cups. Calum had been there sometimes, helping his mother wait on the guests. Now it turned out the boy was Cursed.

He ducked back behind the tree, crouching down and hurrying back to where he left his clothes. As quiet as he could, he picked them up and rung them out, then slipped them on still damp. He'd have to go barefoot until he could make his way back to where he left his sandals, but that was fine. He'd be able to afford a new pair of sandals soon, and keep himself from remembering for a long, long time.

CHAPTER FOUR

Eryn

"This has to be the best duck I've ever tasted," Eryn's father said, taking a huge bite of a small wing. It should have come as no surprise to anyone that Jaerl Albion was a large man, with a barrel chest and plenty of muscle to help him swing the blacksmith's hammer. He was also a man without hair, most of it having been burned away in the heat of the forge, the rest shaved off by Pash Albion to keep her husband "neat and tidy".

"You always say it's the best duck you've ever tasted," Roddin said.

Her older brother was perched on the back of his chair, his grey cloak hanging off the back, all the way down to the floor. A hunting knife hung from his hip, and his bow was lying in the corner near the door.

When he had turned sixteen, Roddin had taken an apprenticeship under Master Lewyn to become a woodsman, one of the only other jobs in their small village besides merchant or farmer. As it was, Master Lewyn had given him the knife and the bow, and took him out daily to teach him the secrets of the Whistling Wood. Secrets like how to trap a hare, how to tell poisonous berries from delicious berries, and how to hunt a stag.

Eryn sometimes wished that she could be a hunter too, but between the smithy and the household, she had little enough free time.

"True enough," Papa agreed. "On second thought, it could use a little more salt." He laughed then, his booming voice that was made to shout out over the clang of steel filling their

small home.

Mother swatted him on the shoulder with a smile on her face, and Eryn forced her most sincere grin. She was still feeling guilty for having used her Curse to shift the bag, just a little.

"So, Eryn," Roddin said, his voice both light and mischievous. "I hear that Robar Dunn's eldest has taken a liking to you."

Eryn looked at her brother, feeling her face begin to flush at the mention of Edwyn Dunn. He was known to all of the unwed girls in the village as the most comely future husband, though she did have some doubts about his overall intelligence. While he could cause her face to melt with flames of visionary delight, she had her heart set on finding someone more like her brother, someone with charm and looks, but a mind to match them.

"Are you starting with me?" she asked, her smile turning true.

"What if I am?"

"If you are, I'll have to stop you," she replied. It was a common game they were playing, one that usually ended with one of them bruised in the playful melee. They had a pair of sticks they had whittled out in the yard, sticks that had a vague resemblance to swords.

"Children," Mother said. "That's enough."

"We're just having some fun," Roddin said. "Anyway, I really did hear that."

The kitchen fell silent. He hadn't meant to cause it, but he had a tendency to forget that Eryn was Cursed. All he ever saw was his sister.

"Right. I'm sorry, Eryn," he said.

"It's okay," Eryn replied. "I know you didn't mean anything by it."

Someone more like her brother, she thought. If only a Cursed could marry. Even if her husband never saw through to her secret, it was said that the Cursed could never bear children of

their own, and if a wife never bore her husband children, he would know that it meant she was Cursed. That didn't stop her from dreaming about it, or wishing for it, or living her life as though it was something that could be. As unlikely as it may seem, letting go was just too hard.

"Is there any more porridge?" Papa asked, breaking the silence.

"Of course, my love," Mother said. She reached over him to take his bowl, and he grabbed her hands and kissed them on the way by.

"You are the star that always guides me home," he said, his voice turning softer than you would imagine a blacksmith's could.

"And you are the hero in the night that I long for," she replied.

"Can you spare us?" Roddin asked, faking that he was choking. It led them to another round of laughter.

The laughter was broken by a heavy pounding at the kitchen door. It was forceful enough that it kicked up dust from around the hinges.

"Jaerl, Roddin, are you home?" It was the voice of Constable Yarrow, the head of Watertown.

Roddin bounced off his chair, taking three steps to the door and pulling it open. As soon as he did, the Constable made his way in.

"Jaerl, there you are." Constable Yarrow was an older man, but still lean as if he were a youth. He had a thick mop of white hair on top of his head, and Eryn could see that it was slick with sweat. She knew he must have run to their home, the entire mile from the village center.

"What is it, Gideon?" Jaerl asked, pushing himself away from the table and rising to his feet.

"Soldiers," he replied. "*His* soldiers."

Jaerl looked first at Eryn, and then at Pash. She could see the worry cross his eyes, though he hid it in an instant. "What are they doing here?" he asked. "*His* soldiers haven't come to Watertown since I was a boy."

Eryn felt her heart jump up into her throat, and start leaping around there like she had swallowed a frog. Had they come for her? Had someone seen what she had done to the salt?

"I don't know," the Constable said. "They only just arrived, and I ran out here to the farms and to your house to tell you. To tell everyone. *His* soldiers don't come unless they're hunting a Cursed."

Jaerl walked over, past the Constable to the door. "I'll go and get my hammer," he said. "We should find out what they're doing here. Roddin, you come with me. My dears, wait here."

He ushered the Constable out the door. Roddin followed behind, grabbing his bow and quiver on the way out. Before he closed the door, he looked at Eryn. "It'll be okay," he whispered. "I won't let anything happen to you."

Eryn smiled, but it didn't quell the beating of her chest. As soon as the door closed, Mother came over and wrapped her up in a tight hug.

"Don't worry, my love," she said. "Papa will take care of everything."

"I don't want them to take me away," Eryn said into her mother's shoulder. "I didn't do anything wrong. It's not my fault. I don't want to die."

Pash held her daughter and tried to fight back her tears. She squeezed her tighter. She would do anything for her daughter, and would give anything to see her safe.

Time passed. After a while, Eryn and her mother broke their embrace. "Go up into the attic," Mother said. She was getting worried that Papa and Roddin had yet to return. "I'll tell you when you can come down."

Eryn was scared, but she nodded and scooted up the ladder into the attic. Just because Mother had sent her up there, that didn't mean they were coming for her. She was just being cautious.

More time passed. Eryn could tell the moon had risen high into the night by the glow of light filtering through the tightly woven thatch of the roof. She had begun to calm a short while ago, and now she rested almost peacefully.

Her peace was disturbed by the sound of horses and shouting. Her heart rising to her throat once more, Eryn jumped to her feet, ready to descend the ladder to find out what was going on.

"Eryn, stay hidden," Pash cried from below.

She backed away from the ladder, moving to the rear corner and crushing herself into a ball, as tight as she could be. She heard the shouting more clearly now, Papa calling out to Mother.

"Pash, run, please. For the love of Amman, run." Her father was desperate. The words frightened her more than anything ever had before. More than Roddin almost being trodden over by Maxin had.

"Jaerl," Pash shouted. "Jaerl!"

The pounding of hooves was getting louder. Eryn knew they were getting close. She tried to stay tucked in tight, but she had to know what was happening. She had to check on her father and Roddin. Getting to her feet, she ran over to the lowest part of the thatch and clawed at it frantically until she had cleared away just enough to see.

She was looking out too far. The first thing she saw were the horses, giant black horses unlike any she had ever seen. They were ridden by men in metal helmets and armor, six in all. Two

were carrying torches, and two were holding bows. The bows had arrows already notched to them.

It was then she saw Papa and Roddin, running up ahead of the horses but losing ground fast. Roddin was lighter and faster, and he paced way ahead of their father, desperate to reach the house.

"Pash, take Eryn. Take Maxin and run!" Her father's voice was so loud. She would never forget how loud it was.

Eryn watched her brother. She saw an arrow land in the ground near his feet. They were shooting at him!

"Eryn," Pash cried. "Come on, my love, we have to go!"

Eryn's eyes filled with tears. How had they discovered her secret? She hadn't told anyone! The last thing she saw before she started for the ladder was her father turning to face the riders, raising his hammer up over his head.

"How dare you try to harm my child," he screamed.

She jumped down without using the ladder, landing in her mother's arms. At the same time, the door opened and her brother stumbled in. He dropped to the ground exhausted, his tiredness saving his life as an arrow followed him through the door and struck the cupboard behind them.

"Roddin," Mother said. "Take Eryn. You have to get out of here!"

He looked up at them. His eyes were bloodshot, and he could barely breathe. Still, he got to his feet. "Father," he said, turning around.

They saw it. All of them saw it. The soldiers had caught up to Jaerl Albion. The two with the bows had put arrows into his chest. The two with the torches had circled him, and the other

two had dismounted. They approached him with swords in hand.

"Roddin," Mother grabbed him by the shoulders and shook him. "Take Eryn. Go!"

He looked at her, the pain clearly written on his face, but he nodded. "I love you," he said to her. He never questioned that she would go out to try to defend their father, to defend the object of her undying love.

"I love both of you, more than you'll ever know. More than death can ever take away. We'll meet again in the fields of Amman." She took Eryn by the shoulders then, and knelt down. "This was not your fault, my love. *He* is a cruel and unjust man, and *his* laws are cruel and unjust. Escape *his* soldiers and live on. Promise me you will."

Eryn's eyes were blurry with tears. She leaned forward and kissed her mother on the cheek. "I will," she said. "I promise." Roddin grabbed her hand, and started pulling her towards the other side of the house, where Maxin was stabled.

"I'll hold them as long as I can," Pash Albion said. "I love you both, forever." With that, she grabbed her heaviest pan and stormed out the door.

Just before Roddin pulled her out of view, Eryn could see that her father was on the ground, the soldiers over him with their swords stuck into his body.

"We don't have time for the saddle," her brother shouted, throwing open the stable door and tugging Eryn along. He pushed open Maxin's pen. The horse shifted and whined, able to sense that something was wrong.

"I'm sorry," Eryn sobbed, her tears running freely. Her brother's hands wrapped around her hips and lifted her up enough for her to slide onto the horse's back. A moment later he slid on behind her, reaching past and taking hold of the horse's mane.

"Ho, Maxin," he cried, pulling on the hair. The horse cried and went straight into a

gallop, pounding out of stables and into the empty fields around their home.

"Roddin, look," Eryn said. Even through bleary eyes, she could see down the hill that led into the village. The entire center was engulfed in flame.

"Bastards," he said between gulps of air. "They insisted the village was hiding a Cursed. They started lighting up the buildings one by one until somebody said it was you. We started running, to warn you. They didn't hurry after us, they just started setting the rest on fire anyway, and then they killed Constable Yarrow. For complicity, they said, whatever that means."

"I'm sorry," Eryn said again. "This is all my fault."

"No," Roddin shouted. "This is *his* fault."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"Into the Whistling Wood. I hope we can lose them there. Maxin is a fine cart-horse, but she can't outrun those giant stallions of theirs."

CHAPTER FIVE

Silas

It was midday when Silas got back to Root, and the town was coming alive with the day's activity. Enough so that Silas had to wait in a line of travelers coming into the town through the north gate, under the watchful eyes of *his* soldiers. He had been without a hard drink for nearly six hours already, and he was finding he didn't like it.

When he finally reached the front of the line, he was stopped by one of the soldiers, who looked him up and down. He hadn't been looking forward to this part. They didn't care when you left the town, but they always cared when you came back.

"Name and business," the soldier said, his voice gruff and autonomous from repeating the same words hundreds of times each day.

"Silas Morningstar," he replied. "I live here." He took a breath in through his congested nose, and then began to cough.

The soldier didn't react to his coughing. He just turned and passed the information on to a man in a black cotton shirt and pants. The man was sitting on a stool, and had a large book laid out on a simple wooden table. He ran his finger along the spine until he found the spot he wanted, and then lifted all of the pages before it out of the way. He then flipped through one by one, his finger tracing down the center.

"There we are," he said. "He is current on his residency tax."

The soldier waved him through.

Every man, woman, child, merchant, cart, and horse had to pay some kind of tax in order to live in, or visit, the larger towns and cities of *his* domain, which as far as Silas knew was the entirety of the world. He didn't know what *he* did with all of the coin that was collected, though reconsidering the number of soldiers just in Root, he supposed it was used to keep them fed, clothed, armed, trained, and paid.

"What for?" he wondered again.

Silas made his way back south, headed for the Constable's office. Now that he was more clean, he wandered closer to the iron fence that surrounded the building, trying to see through the dense, brightly-colored foliage to the soldiers he knew were behind it. He could hear the faint clang of swords connecting, and the twang of arrows being loosed to targets. He didn't know why, but the sounds stirred something in him. He needed to make this quick, so he could go and find a good ale.

"What are you doing here, old man?" the guard asked, incredulous, when Silas approached him at the gate.

Silas felt like he should have recognized the man, but he couldn't put him in any specific time or place. "I've come to speak with the Constable," Silas said. "I have some information."

The officer squinted his eyes. "You have information? Let me guess, there are imps in your pants."

Silas didn't remember ever having made that claim. He shook his head. "I have real information. About a Cursed."

The guard stopped squinting, his eyes going wide. It was forbidden to provide false information about a Cursed. The punishment for doing so was death by hanging.

The guard turned and brought out a ring of keys. He stuck one into a lock forged into the

gate, turned it, and swung it open. "Amman help you if you're speaking from the bottle," he said. "Go straight up to the Constable's office and tell the steward what you told me."

Silas bowed slightly and walked in. He marveled at the gardens on either side of the wide stone path, but he also didn't linger. He passed under the heavy stone columns surrounding the office, reaching a pair of thick wooden doors. As he approached, another guard barked an order, and two wiry men in grey, burlap prison clothes pulled the heavy doors open. When he was through, they pushed them closed.

The doors opened into a foyer manned by the Constable's steward, a short, thin man with a beaked nose and no hair. His dress matched the man who had taken his name at the town gates, and he too sat on a stool behind a wooden table, writing something down.

Silas walked over to him, his heart beginning to beat faster in anxious anticipation of what he was about to do.

"State your name and business," the steward said, without looking up.

"Uh. I'm here to see Constable Penticott. Um. It's. Um. My name is..."

The steward looked up, and saw who was speaking. "Silas Morningstar," he said. "I know you. What's your business with the Constable?"

Silas didn't know if he should be impressed or afraid that the steward knew his name. His body began to tremble as he spoke. "A Cursed," he said. "I have information about a Cursed." He smiled then, a nervous, hopeful smile.

The steward eyed him for a moment, deciding whether or not he was serious. Silas looked back at him, and tried to quell his fidgeting. Satisfied, the steward stood up and went to the inner door. "Wait here a moment, Silas," he said, and he vanished through it.

Silas stood in the foyer. His heart was pounding, his body was trembling, and he could

barely contain his nerves. Some people spent their whole lives hoping to learn the identity of a Cursed. There was even a guild whose sole purpose was to track down Cursed and report them. That was because there was a reward for turning in a Cursed. A *large* reward. Enough coin to live like a noble for a year or more. All he had to do was name the afflicted, and once they captured or killed them, the coin was his.

The steward returned with Constable Penticott. They were nearly the same age, he and Silas, though the Constable was clean and tidy, with a smoothly shaven face and his white hair cropped close to his head. He had a rough, grizzled look to him, made even more so by the fine black leathers he wore. A red, bleeding eye was dyed onto his jerkin, over his heart.

"Silas," he said. "You do realize if you're lying, or wrong about this, I'll have no choice but to hang you."

Silas nodded, shifting nervously from one foot to the other. "I was downstream, taking a bath," he said, the words spilling out almost too fast to be understood. "I heard voices, so I climbed up onto the shore. I saw Selene and Calum Hess sitting together. He was begging her to keep his secret. He had blood under his eye."

The Constable raised his eyebrow. "I see," he said. He looked over at the steward. "Send for Roque right away."

The steward bowed and left the building, headed for the messenger's office.

"My reward?" Silas asked.

"If your information is right, you'll get it, but we'll need to send for Roque before we can move in."

Silas felt his stomach churning again, his body losing strength. "You mean I'm not going to get paid today?" he asked.

Penticott shook his head. "I'm afraid not. Our own Mediator, Lia, was dispatched to Watertown only a few days ago. We don't expect her back for another fortnight at least, and that's assuming she doesn't have to transfer the Cursed to the collection point before she returns. It's been quite a while since we've had two Cursed turn up within a matter of days. In any case, we'll send the fastest horse to the capital to summon him. When he arrives, we'll go to the Old Oak with a squad of soldiers, so that you can name Calum as Cursed. Hopefully, he won't resist, and Roque will take him to the collection point."

Silas stopped moving. "What?" he whispered, the word getting caught in his throat. He didn't know he had to look the boy in the eye and name him. His excitement was quickly turning to complete fear.

"It's *his* law, Silas. To dissuade the desperate from making false claims." Penticott stared at him, suggesting that it was exactly what he was doing.

"I know what I heard," Silas said. Didn't he? He was sure he did. "I'll be at the Sleepy Hollow."

The Constable shook his head. "I'm sorry, Silas," he said. "We need to keep you here. We can't afford for you to disappear before Roque arrives."

Silas had it in his mind to run, but he didn't. He had no chance of escaping an entire building of soldiers. He let the Constable take him by the arm and lead him further into the building, past the offices and down the stairs into the dungeon. There was only one other prisoner being held in the small, damp, cool cells beneath the building; an angry looking man with olive skin. Silas knew by his complexion that he must have been from the marshes.

"Look on the bright side," Constable Penticott said. "It's only straw, but it's a bed, and you'll get two meals every day. That's probably better than you've had in some time." He started

to leave, and then turned back. "Oh, and I'll send someone down with a razor and some new clothes. I won't have you looking like the drunk vagrant you are when Roque arrives."

Silas let out a loud sigh, and went over to the bundle of straw in the corner. It was a three day ride from here to Elling, and that was assuming the messenger rode the horse as hard as he dared. That meant he would be stuck in the dungeon for six days at least. If Penticott didn't want him looking like a drunk, he was sure the man wouldn't grant his request for a drink either. He sat down and put his head in his hands.

"I wish I was washing dishes right now," he moaned.

"Wake up, murderer."

Silas opened his eyes. He had fallen asleep on the straw bed, turned on his side and facing the wall. When he rolled onto his back, he saw he wasn't alone. An olive skinned face was glaring down at him, an angry sneer painting it.

"Sweet dreams, you bastard?" the man asked, kicking him in the ribs with his bare foot. Silas cried out in pain and surprise.

"What are you doing?" he cried. "Leave me alone." Silas looked over to his cell door.

It was open.

"Do you think I don't recognize you, you murdering pig?" He kicked Silas again.

"Please, I don't know what you're talking about. I've never killed anyone." At least, he didn't think he had. His memories could be a little shaky sometimes, but he would have known if he had killed someone. Wouldn't he?

The man leaned down and put his arms under Silas, lifting him with ease. Now that he

was closer, Silas could see the thick masses of muscle and the sheer size of the man. "No? Let me remind you." He threw Silas against the back of the cell, knocking the wind out of him.

He started wheezing, and doubled over.

"My name is Aziz Lozen. My sister's name was Ezra. My mother's name was Vishnu. My father's name was Roedic." For each name, he punched Silas in the stomach. "You killed them. All of them. You and *his* bastard soldiers."

Silas heard the names. He didn't remember them. He didn't know them. He had never been any kind of soldier, never mind one of *his* soldiers.

"Please," he gasped. "You have me mistaken with someone else. I didn't... I couldn't..."

"I'd know your face anywhere, murderer. Age and hair can't hide you from me. I've dreamed about killing you for half of my life. I never imagined I would find you locked up in one of *his* dungeons." He punched Silas in the gut three more times, laughing all the while.

Silas wanted to slump to the floor, and go back to sleep. He wanted to slip past Aziz and run out of the cell, up the stairs, and past the guards. He wanted anything but to be leaning against the wall, being pummeled to death.

"Help," he croaked. It was barely even loud enough for himself to hear.

Aziz laughed harder. "They can't hear you, murderer. I know, I've screamed myself hoarse. Even if they could, they wouldn't come. They don't care about us. They don't care about anyone who tries to think for themselves. All of those people out there. They think that they are following their own path, living their own life. They don't realize how *he* controls it. They think *he* only takes the Cursed, but that isn't true. I know, I've spent years searching for answers. *He* takes what *he* needs from the people, to have what *he* wants. No matter the cost to others. Like my family."

He started punching, faster and harder. His eyes were welling with tears now, his pain finally finding some release in beating Silas to death.

Silas moved his arms, trying to block the punches, but he couldn't do it. He was too old, too slow, too weak, too hungover.

"Please," he whispered.

Aziz didn't listen.

I'm going to die, Silas thought. He knew it was true. He could feel his body beginning to bend under the pressure of the blows. Soon enough it would break. His mind traveled to the seashore. He was watching a huge, three-masted wooden ship sailing away from the land and out over the horizon. His lady, his love was on that ship. Why was she leaving him?

Under the pressure of the blows, something inside Silas shifted. It was a corked bottle that was never meant to come unstoppered, that had been drowned in the flood of ale for nearly ten years. Now the cork was pushed upward by the pressure, breaking the airtight seal and allowing a memory to drip out.

Aziz drew back his hand and threw another punch, the first intended for Silas' face. Without warning, Silas shifted his weight and ducked to the side of the blow. Aziz's fist hit the cement wall, his fingers breaking under the force. It must have been painful, but in his anger the man didn't notice.

Silas wasn't thinking, just acting. When Aziz tried to punch him in the gut, he twisted and caught the arm, using the forward momentum to pull the man into the wall. Aziz cried out in pain, his nose crushed against the stone, then felt himself being pulled and flipped onto his back.

He stared up at Silas, his anger turning to fear. The old man looked different. Younger, stronger, harder. "You are Heden himself," he whispered. He saw Silas raise his bare foot. He

saw it lash out at his temple like a snake. He never saw anything else.

Silas looked down at Aziz's dead body with a mixture of fear and sadness. Where had he learned to fight like that? How did he know where to kick him to kill him? How had he done it with no thought or remorse?

He didn't know the answer to any of the questions. He had acted on instinct to defend himself. He had done things he hadn't even known he knew how to do. The feeling was overwhelming.

He winced from a sharp stabbing pain in his ribs. "It was him or me," he whispered. "I don't know who he thought I was?"

He shifted his attention to the open cell door. He knew he couldn't escape. Just because the door was open, he'd still need to get past all of the soldiers. He decided he would just lay down and rest, and wait for them to come to feed him. Then he would explain everything.

CHAPTER SIX

Eryn

They had barely closed half the distance to the woods when Eryn looked back and saw that the soldiers were following. Two of them, the ones with the bows. She saw the others with the torches back near the house, and a moment later the roof began to smoke.

"They're burning it down," she cried. Roddin hadn't turned to look. He had enough to deal with, worrying about what was in front of them.

"We don't need it anymore," he said. "We can't go home, Erie. We can't ever go home."

If she'd had time to think about it, she would have cried. She knew if they lived the time to mourn would come, but it would have to wait. She had promised her mother she would survive, and she was going to put all of her courage and effort into that.

"They're gaining," she said, watching the rear while Roddin maneuvered Maxin towards the first copse of berry bushes. She remembered being out there just that morning, picking the berries for their porridge.

"We're almost there," he replied. His voice was stern and strong, so unlike the playful tone she was used to.

Eryn kept her eyes on the soldiers behind them, noticing that the other four had chosen to remain behind. Were they so sure that they would catch the two of them? Did they have any reason not to be?

"Watch out," she squealed, seeing the soldier's arm slide back, his body arched sideways

on the horse while he trained his bow. Roddin directed Maxin to the right, and the arrow landed in the dirt beside them. "We aren't going to make it."

"Yes we are." He kicked into Maxin's sides, and the horse drove forward. He knew the forest, especially here at the edge. He knew all of the nooks and crannies, the narrow trails and rocks and streams. He knew the best path to take to lose them. The soldiers vanished behind them as they pushed into the woods.

Roddin rode the horse hard, left and right and left again, in a pattern designed to lose the soldiers. He leaped over a thicket of briar, and pounded across a puddle, deep from yesterday's rain. Finally, he let the exhausted horse slow to a walk.

"Do you th-"

"Shh..." Roddin raised his finger to his lips and sat perfectly still, listening. Eryn didn't hear anything.

"I think we lost them," Eryn whispered, after a minute or more had passed.

"I think we did," her brother agreed. He turned on the horse's back and slid off. "Come on."

"What are you doing?" She wasn't sure it was a good idea to get down. What if they needed to make a quick escape?

"Two people are much quieter and less noticeable than a horse," he said. "We have to leave him behind."

She didn't want to, but she knew they must. She leaned over Maxin's neck and kissed the side of his head. "Thank you," she said, before jumping off.

"This way." Roddin pointed towards a brace of poisonous ivy. "Try not to let it touch your skin, but if it must, it must. I can make a salve later. They won't be expecting us to go that

way."

Eryn didn't argue. She was glad she had worn her pants and blouse today, along with her leather boots. She didn't usually dress so boyishly to do the household chores, but she had stained the only dress she cared for during a stick-fighting match with Roddin only two days back, and her mother hadn't had time to wash it.

Mother. The thought of her came unbidden to her mind, and it was all she could do to keep walking. Her mother was dead, she realized. Her father was dead. She had seen the arrows in his chest, and the swords in his stomach.

Without warning, her insides began to churn, and a moment later she was leaning against a tree, heaving onto the grass.

"Eryn, are you okay?" Roddin put his arm around her shoulders and helped her steady.

She wanted to scream, and to cry, and to shake with anger and rage. She wanted to lay there and never move again. She'd promised she would survive. She took a few deep breaths and calmed herself.

"I know," he said. "There will be time for that later. Right now we have to be quiet."

They walked through the poisonous ivy, careful to step between the leaves and the vines so that their feet wouldn't leave a trail. Eryn stumbled once, her hand coming down on the plant. She felt the slippery substance that coated the leaves spread across her hand, and she stifled a groan, knowing it was going to itch like a bucket of fleas in an hour or two.

After the ivy, they came to a clearing. Crossing it was a gigantic fallen tree. At one time, it must have been standing in the center, its massive roots taking all of the nutrients from the soil around it and not leaving enough for any of the other growth except for moss and grasses.

"I've never been in this part of the Wood before," Eryn said.

"I came here with Master Lewyn a fortnight back. We sat on top of the old redwood and looked at the stars. He showed me the constellations."

"Constellations?"

"Yes. A long time ago, scholars looked at the sky and decided to name the shapes the lights made. I don't know why, but it was fun trying to pick them out."

"I wish you could show me the constellations." Eryn looked up at the sky. She could see the white lights winking back at her, but she knew they didn't have time to stop and stare.

"One day I will," Roddin said. "I promise."

They kept walking towards the other side of the clearing, when they heard the loud snap of a branch breaking.

"Get under the tree," Roddin said. "Quickly."

They turned and ran back to the old tree, finding a space between the trunk and a branch to tuck themselves into.

Eryn's heart pounded, and she was squeezed in so tight with her brother that she could feel his heart was pounding too. They both sat motionless, trying not to even breathe, listening to every wisp of sound that made it into their hiding place.

A minute passed, and then another, and then another. Just when Eryn was going to say she thought it was safe to leave, they heard the snort of a horse, and then the sound of hooves on the grass. The soldiers were here!

They sat in the shadow of the tree and waited. There was a dim light from the sky, and it was added to by the torches the soldiers were now carrying.

The soldiers moved slowly through the clearing, and one approached the tree, waving his torch back and forth so it would light up the crevices between the branches.

"They couldn't have gotten far," the one that was further away said. His voice was deep and rough.

"Not without their horse," the other agreed. He sounded more kind. "It was a kindness to put that old nag down."

Eryn sucked in her breath, making the slightest gasping sound. They had killed Maxin too!

"Did you hear that?" The soldier near the tree stopped moving and dismounted his stallion. A dozen heartbeats later, they could see the very bottom of his feet past their branch.

"Just the wind," the other one said.

The soldier swung his torch, and Eryn watched the flickering glow of it move closer. She could feel Roddin tensing next to her, ready to defend his sister if they were discovered.

Except the branch was too thick, and the torchlight couldn't penetrate deep enough into the crook. For just a moment they could see the darkness of his eyes, shadowed by the metal helm, and then he turned and walked back the other way. There was a creak of leather as he regained his mount, and they rode out of the clearing.

Eryn waited a long time before speaking. "They didn't see us," she whispered.

"No. We can go out and stretch our legs. I think we're safe for tonight, but we have to try to keep moving. They know we're out here, which means if those two don't find us, they'll send more soldiers."

"Roddin?" Eryn said, once they had left the safety of the tree and stretched their legs out.

"Yes?"

"Why are you helping me?" She felt so tired, and so scared. She could only imagine that her brother felt the same way.

"What do you mean? Why wouldn't I help you? We're family."

"I've heard stories," Eryn said. "Molly Timber used to say that Cursed weren't safe from anyone, not even their own families. Because..." She stumbled over the words. "Because people knew if they protected them, they would be killed too." She fought against her tears again, intent on staying quiet.

"I'd rather die protecting my sister, than live as a coward," Roddin said. "Mother and father felt the same way. I miss them too, and in time I'll mourn for them, but I know their end was a proud one. They are with Amman now, basking in His light and peace."

"Thank you," Eryn said.

"You don't need to thank me," he replied. "Anyone who wouldn't take care of their little sister deserves their place with Heden."

"*He* deserves to be with Heden," she said.

"Yes," Roddin agreed.

"Roddin?" Eryn said again.

"Yes?"

"How do you think they found out about me? You said one of the villagers told them. Who? And how did they know? I haven't used the Curse, only a few times in the attic, and maybe once or twice by the berry bushes when no one else was around."

Her brother was silent. He stared up into the night sky. He looked down at the grass beneath their feet. When he finally looked at her, he had tears in his eyes.

"Edwyn told them," he said. "After I told him."

Eryn's breath caught in her throat, and she took a step away from her brother. She felt like she was suffocating, and there was nowhere to turn for air.

"Why would you do that?" she croaked.

"I didn't mean to," he said. "Eryn, I'm sorry." He stepped towards her, but she backed away. "It was during the last full moon. I went to visit with him after returning with Master Lewyn. I found him out in his stables, with a jug of something foul. He held it out to me, and told me I was a yellow toad if I wouldn't drink it. So I drank it."

Eryn couldn't believe what she was hearing. She couldn't believe her own brother had been the one to spill her secret. That he had been the one who caused the soldiers to come, and for her parents to be laying dead in a field, their house burned to the ground. Constable Yarrow, and even their horse.

"The drink, it... made me say things. Tell secrets. It made us both tell secrets. That's how I knew Edwyn was taking a liking to you, at least until he found out what you were."

"I can't believe you did that. I can't believe you would be so irresponsible." Her voice was beginning to rise, and Roddin put his finger to his lips.

"The next day, I made him promise not to tell. He swore that he wouldn't, because we were best friends, and he wouldn't want to hurt me. I thought that was the end of it. He broke his promise to me."

Roddin walked towards her, and tried to give her a hug.

"You broke your promise to me!" Eryn didn't think, she just acted, pulling back her arm and slapping him in the face, as hard as she could.

She had more muscle and more strength than a typical fourteen year-old girl. The slap echoed into the night, and Roddin's head jerked to the side. He fell to the ground, doubled over in pain.

"They're dead because of you," she said.

"I know," he replied, his voice heavy and quiet. "It's all my fault."

"It is all your fault." The words didn't come from Eryn. The voice was a woman's voice. Both of their heads turned in the direction of the speaker.

She was standing in the clearing, only a dozen feet away. They had never heard her coming. She had long golden hair that framed her delicate face, and crystal blue eyes. She was wearing a shimmering black dress that hugged against her body, covered by a heavy black cloak. A long staff of shining metal rested in her hand. The top of the staff was shaped like the claw of a raptor, holding a glowing blue crystal in its teeth.

Roddin thought she was the most beautiful woman he had ever seen.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"I am Lia. I've come for you, Eryn," she said. "I've come to help you."

Eryn didn't know what she meant. Help her? Who was this strange woman?

"Help me?" She was barely able to speak, and the words fell out nearly silent, but Lia heard them all the same.

"Yes. You have the Curse."

That was when she saw it. Almost hidden below her neck, holding her cloak to her, was a red crystal clasp in the shape of an eye.

"You're one of *his*," she said. The realization hung in the air between them.

"You shouldn't have run, Eryn," Lia said. "We can't take you when you run. *He* doesn't approve."

Roddin got to his feet, taking his knife from his hip. "Leave her alone," he said, snapping out of whatever trance her beauty had put him under.

Lia smiled at him. "I'm sorry," she said. "I'm sorry it has to be this way."

She lifted the staff and pointed the crystal at him. A blue bolt of lightning shot from the tip, hitting Roddin in the chest and throwing him backwards.

"Roddin!" Eryn forgot about the woman and ran to her brother, leaning over him. The lightning had gone right through his leathers, leaving them smoking. She rushed to pull them off, frantic to help him. "Roddin."

His eyes were open, looking up at her. She got them off, and then gasped.

There was a hole through his body, and she could see the grass beneath him. He wasn't looking at her. He was dead.

Eryn whipped her head around to look at the woman, her body filling with rage. "You killed him," she shouted.

She didn't care if the soldiers came back. What did it matter, if they had already been discovered? What did it matter, if her entire family was dead?

"I'm sorry," Lia repeated.

Eryn saw that she had a tear in her eye. A tear of blood.

"You're Cursed?" All of the anger fled her, and she was left with nothing but confusion.

Lia didn't answer. She turned the staff, pointing it at Eryn.

In that instant, Eryn's mind took her to another place. She traveled back in time, to the day that had started so perfect and had ended so awful. To her life before this day, this moment, when she had unlocked her Curse in order to save Roddin from being trampled to death.

In that instant, she remembered what it was like to feel the tingle in her ears, to will the power to come, to wish and hope beyond hope that she could change the inevitable.

She didn't know what she did, and she could hardly recall what happened after. She remembered seeing the glow of the crystal become more intense, and she remembered feeling

the tingling in her ears. After that, the entire world had gone dark.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Silas

"Well, Silas," Penticott said. "I didn't think you had it in you."

Silas was sitting on his straw bed, looking up at the Constable. Two soldiers were wrapping the body of Aziz in a cloth so they could take him out to be burned.

"I didn't do it," Silas said. "He slipped or something, and hit his head on the wall. He almost killed me. Who was he?"

Penticott looked back at Aziz's body. "Nobody," he said. "A criminal."

"He said *his* soldiers killed his family."

"They might have, if someone in his family was Cursed, and they were protecting them. You know that."

Silas nodded. "I just don't know why he attacked me for it. I've never been a soldier, have I?"

Penticott laughed. "No. You haven't. I'm sure of it."

"How do you know?" Silas was sure he hadn't been, but he wanted someone else to confirm it.

"*His* soldiers serve for life. That is the oath we take when we join. When we're too old to be out in the field, we move on to do whatever we're capable of doing, whether that's as a steward of one of the provinces, or a cook in a barracks kitchen."

"What if you don't want to serve for life?"

Penticott gave him a strange look then, as though he couldn't even fathom the question. "We always serve for life," he said. "It is a noble and just service, and we are well cared for. Nobody has ever changed their mind."

Silas sat there, thinking about it. There was something in him that wasn't so sure Penticott was right, but maybe that was his hangover. He watched the soldiers take Aziz away.

"I'll send a healer down to with a salve for your bruises, and to make sure nothing is broken," Penticott said. "I can't have you looking such a mess when Roque arrives. For now, just rest."

Silas laid back down on the straw and stared up at the ceiling. Constable Penticott left him, locking the cell door as he did. If Silas had been looking, he would have seen the questioning stare the man gave him before leaving the dungeon.

The healer came down a few hours later with bandages and a smelly, oily substance that he spread liberally across Silas' chest and stomach. He had gasped when he had seen the scar running across his upper body, and remarked that he had never seen anyone survive such a nasty looking wound. For his part, Silas remained silent. He was lost inside himself, searching for answers to questions he had never known to ask.

He woke up a few hours after the healer had left, his body trembling uncontrollably and his mind racing out of control. The shaking was painful on its own, but even more so with the injuries Aziz had given him. He cried out in agony and begged for someone to come and help him, but of course nobody could hear him, and nobody came. He closed his eyes and held them

shut tight, praying to Amman that the tremors would stop, even though he never prayed to Amman, and didn't even believe he existed. After the prayers didn't help, he began to cry, leaving his eyes blurry and sore.

After that, he began to hear voices.

He didn't know who they belonged to, but at first, there were two of them, a man and a woman. They were arguing, these two voices, arguing about rumors and hope, about an ocean and a ship and a land far away from theirs. They were arguing about life and death, about freedom and tyranny, and about justice. In the end, the woman said she was leaving, and that she wished for him to stay and die.

He stayed, and at least a part of him died.

His mind returned to the seashore, to the ship sailing out across the blue waters. He realized then that the male voice had been his, and the other, his wife's.

Next came another voice, the voice of a soldier, a commander, ordering men out into a village. He could see what was happening now, see it as though it were right in front of him. He didn't know how he had gotten here, but it was so real. He was riding a large white destrier, and he had a torch in his hand. When he got close enough to each building, he would hold the torch out against its thatch roof, sliding it along the distance until it was well aflame. Then he would move on to another, and another, until the entire village was on fire, and many of the villagers dead. He had helped them burn it all down.

No, he had done more than that. The voice was his own. He had commanded it.

More voices followed, each a memory that had been locked inside the bottle, now free to bubble out and into his delirious state. He could only understand some of what they were saying, and some of what he was doing. He would open his eyes sometimes, and he would be in some

other place and time, and sometimes he would be on the straw bed staring up at the stone ceiling, shivering and shaking and trembling.

During both occasions he would cry out in pain and ask for it to stop. He would beg for a drink; of the healer, of Penticott, of the devils in his nightmares. He would beg for the bottle to be stoppered once more, so that he didn't have to relive the terror and the agony and the cold hard truth.

He *was* a murderer.

Silas opened his eyes. At first, he wasn't sure if he was awake or not, because he wasn't trembling. For once, his body was still. He took a deep breath, and tried to figure out what had happened to him. Everything was so jumbled together into one giant mess of memory and emotion. The only thing he knew for sure was that he didn't know anything for sure. He stared at the ceiling, and waited.

The jailor came down a few hours later, finding Silas staring ahead, unblinking. He unlocked the cell and walked in, then went to kick the old man in the ribs.

Silas surprised him, turning his body and catching the jailor's foot, then shoving with a grunt. The jailor tumbled backwards and fell to the floor.

"Tt... Ti...Time to wake up, Morningstar," the jailor said, stumbling back to his feet. "Constable Penticott ordered me to bring you to the bath and make sure you clean yourself up."

Silas glared at him. "If you ever try to touch me again, I'll kill you," he said. He shook his head, trying to clear it. "How long have I been in here?"

"Six days," the jailor replied. "You were sick. Had a fever or something. Healer's been to see you, and so has the Constable. You were mumbling the whole time, something about a ship, and a kid, and being a murderer. I don't know, I didn't hear that much. Anyway, he sent me down here to get you. Roque rode in this morning, and they're eager to get their hands on the Cursed boy."

Silas held his head in his hands. He couldn't remember most of what he had thought he'd seen and heard. He did remember coming to the Constable's office to turn in a Cursed. He took a deep breath of himself, his nose clear for once. He smelled worse than a fertilizer cart.

"A bath sounds like a good idea."

He got up and followed the jailor out of the cell and to the right, down a small stone hallway to another room. This room had a series of clay pipes running along the ceiling and down the walls into the floor, suspended by thin metal brackets. In the corner of the room was a stone ledge with a hole through it, and in the center was a large pool of water. Silas had never seen anything like it before.

"It's the one benefit to rotting in the dungeon," the jailor said, puffing out his chest with pride, even though he had nothing to do with the room's construction. "The pipes carry the water in from the river, past the ovens where we cook the food for the barracks to heat the water, and then to different pools throughout the grounds." He pointed at the ledge with the hole. "Another pipe carries the waste out to a pit a few miles away."

It may have been interesting, but Silas didn't care that much. He was thirsty. Not for ale. For water.

The jailor shoved him in, handed him the razor and soap, and then started closing the door. "I'll be right back with your new clothes. You have one hour to get cleaned up."

Silas had removed his clothes and thrown them into the corner before the door had finished closing. He carried the razor and the soap over to the raised basin and stuck his finger in, finding it comfortably warmed. He looked down at the bandages wrapping his body, found the end, and unraveled them, noting that most of the bruising had begun to fade, from a dark purple to a less horrible brown. Once again, he ran his finger across the scar.

Murderer.

He heard Aziz's voice in his head. He closed his eyes. He remembered that much. He had murdered people. He had ordered their deaths. Innocent, unarmed people. Farmers and merchants, mothers and fathers. Even children. He didn't remember the details, but he knew that it was so. The thought made him sick.

He leaned over the water, looking at his reflection, at the wild hair covering his face. "This won't do," he said. He dug the blade of the razor into the soap, and began to shave.

Silas had just finished removing the hair from his face when the jailor returned, carrying a bundle of cloth. "You almost look human," he said. He put the clothes on the floor near the door and left.

Silas decided to take that as a complement. He put his hands on the edge of the bath and lifted himself up and over. The jailor had been right, it was one good benefit. He leaned back in the warm water and closed his eyes, ready to enjoy the moment.

He didn't have the chance. No sooner had he closed his eyes then he was overcome with emotion, an emotion that rose from old memories that he couldn't bring back to mind.

Murderer.

It was Aziz's voice.

Murderer.

It was his wife's.

Murderer.

His son's?

Murderer.

His own.

Silas opened his eyes. Whatever had happened to him, whatever would happen to him, he knew one thing. He had to stop the Mediator from taking Calum Hess.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Eryn

When Eryn first woke, she thought she had died and gone to be with her family in the Fields of Amman. The sun was shining bright overhead, and she could hear birds chirping all around her. She could feel the coolness of the grass beneath her head, and a soft, fresh breeze washing over her body. Laying there, she was completely at peace.

Then she noticed the itch.

She sat up, looking down at the palm of her hand. It was bumpy and red and it itched beyond reason, an effect of the ivy's poison. She stared at it and struggled to resist scratching. Roddin had said he could make a salve for it.

Roddin.

It all came back to her in a tide of emotion. Her brother was dead. Her mother and father were dead. *His* soldiers had killed them, all of them. No, that wasn't right. Her brother had been killed by a woman, a Cursed, bearing *his* sigil.

The woman.

She had said her name was Lia, and the last thing Eryn remembered was having the staff pointed at her, the crystal at the tip glowing an intense blue.

She got to her feet and spun around. There was the great big tree, there was the branch they had hid behind, there was her brother. She ran over to him. His eyes still stared up at the heavens.

"Roddin, I'm sorry."

It had been her fault they had been found. Because she was angry. Because he had told her secret.

Eryn put her hand over her brother's eyes and pushed the lids closed. "May you rest in the light and peace of Amman," she said. It was a simple prayer, but one she had seen Timor, the village's Priest of Amman say whenever one of the villagers had passed on, before burning them on a pyre and then burying them in the ground. The ashes would fertilize the fields, it was believed, and ensure the survival of their village.

She sat with him then, and gave herself time to mourn. She leaned over him, filled with wracking sobs, missing him and Mother and Papa. He had made a mistake, and it had cost them all so dearly. Still, she couldn't find it in her heart to not forgive him. He hadn't meant to harm her, or them. He hadn't meant to cause this trouble. Like he had said while they fled the soldiers, it was *his* fault. Mother had said the same.

Eryn didn't know how much time passed while she sat over her brother and cried. Eventually, her body was too tired and too dry for the tears to keep falling. She realized then how dry her mouth was. She had promised she would survive, and somehow so far she had. She needed to find some water.

She got to her feet and looked back at the fallen tree. She had the strength to dig a hole to bury her brother in, but she didn't have the tools. The tree had dislodged a lot of earth when the roots had been pulled, so she decided she would place him there, and cover him with the dirt. Once he was buried, she would try to find her way back to the stream they had crossed.

"I'm not stealing from you," she said, leaning down and taking Roddin's knife from where it lay by his side. "But I need this."

She picked up the knife and turned in the direction of the tree's base. She nearly choked at what she saw.

The grass near the base was black and scarred, as though it had been struck by lightning. The trees out beyond it had scars as well, marks cut deep into the bark like someone had started to cut them down with an axe, and then changed their mind. There were three bodies there, two in the distance near the trees, and another much closer, near the center of the clearing. The body looked as though it had already been on a funeral pyre, though it wasn't completely charred.

Eryn could still make out the form of a glimmering black dress, and see random strands of golden hair still attached to the smoldering remains.

"Did I cause this?" she wondered. "Did I kill them?"

She didn't remember anything after seeing the blue crystal glowing. Only that her ears had tingled before she'd passed out. Had she done this with her Curse?

She felt like she should be upset at having killed someone, but the woman, Lia, had killed her brother, and would have killed her too. *His* soldiers. She knew those were *his* soldiers back there. They had killed her parents.

"Is it wrong to kill those who have wronged you?" she asked out loud. She didn't think it was.

She was cautious in making her way over to the corpse. She had heard stories that *his* soldiers were immortal, and couldn't be killed. That even if you cut off their heads, their bodies would still continue to fight. She had never even seen one of *his* soldiers before yesterday, so she had no idea if any part of the tales were true. They looked dead enough to her, but she couldn't be too careful.

When she got close enough, Eryn put out her toe and lightly kicked the woman's foot.

She tried to ignore the smell that was hanging in the air, and the gruesomeness of the scene. She had seen burns before, both the bodies coming off the pyre, and when Papa's assistant Harl had an accident at the forge and lost his entire right arm to the flames. Lia didn't move.

Convinced she was dead, Eryn came closer, leaning over her and looking down. Only small bits remained of the shiny dress, but she saw the shimmer of red in the ash that surrounded the body, up next to the head. She leaned down and picked at it with the tip of Roddin's knife, revealing the crystal eye that had hung from the woman's neck. The necklace must have melted away, but the eye remained.

"I should leave it," she said. "I should leave everything, bury Roddin, and be on my way."

But she didn't. She couldn't. The eye was *his* symbol, the only thing she even knew about *him*. She felt like she needed it, as a reminder of who had brought this sudden misery into her life. She caught it on the edge of the knife and lifted it to her, holding it in the sunlight in front of her face.

"You caused this," she said, looking at it. "You took everything I had away from me. By Amman, I will take everything you have away from you."

She knew then that she meant it.

Not only would she survive, but she would find *him*, and she would end *his* tyranny, so no others ever had to see their families killed for them, or be killed themselves for nothing more than having the power to help people. Her parents had taught her to be strong, and loving, and just. She would weep for them again, she knew. She would weep a hundred times a hundred times more. But she would also make them proud, and stand up to injustice.

"By Amman, I swear it," she said, putting her free hand to her lips and drawing the sign of Amman to seal the promise.

She took the eye and brought it to the branch of the tree. Then she went back to Roddin and lifted him up, taking the bow and quiver from him, and putting them under the branch as well. After, she went to check on the soldiers.

She was still walking towards them, when she saw it. The staff. It was laying in the grass as though it had been thrown backwards when Lia had fallen. She walked over to it and picked it up. It was lighter than she had thought a staff of metal could be, cool and smooth to the touch. She didn't know of any alloys that were so light, nor did she know of anyone who could mold metal into such a perfect shape. She looked it over curiously, and then shifted her attention to the crystal.

Now that it wasn't glowing, she saw that it wasn't a crystal at all. It was round, dark blue in color, and only the size of a small stone. It had strange, white cloudy swirls that seemed to be floating in it, and small pits in random places on the surface. Eryn stared at it, turning the staff this way and that so she could see it from every angle. Somehow, the stone had created light and heat, enough to burn a hole right through her brother. It could be useful, if she could learn how to make it work.

She decided that she couldn't take the staff. She was afraid that only his soldiers might have such things, and she didn't want to be mistaken as one of *his*. The stone was small though. If she could free it from the teeth, she would take that.

She laid the staff on the ground and leaned over the end, placing Roddin's knife between the metal teeth and the stone and using her weight as leverage. She flexed her muscles, pulling back. It took some effort, but the prong shifted just enough. The stone fell out, onto the grass.

"I'll never regret going to the forge with Papa," she said. She picked the stone up and held it to her face, spinning it in her fingers. It didn't seem like there was anything special about it, but

she knew there was. She held it in her fist and went to look at the soldiers.

Now that they were dead, Eryn didn't find them anywhere near as frightening. In fact, they looked just like any other man who had been burned, except they were both wearing some kind of metal shirts that had melted over them, and metal helmets that were now fused to their skulls.

"There were six of them," Eryn said. "What happened to the others?"

She realized then that she might not be as safe as she thought. She bent down over each one, in search of anything that could be useful. Their clothes had all been destroyed, as had their armor and what she thought had been swords. The only thing she found was a single silver coin, with a large round eye stamped on the front. Somehow it had survived the heat that had killed them.

Eryn considered the coin. Most of the villagers in Watertown bartered with one another, but every once in a while a traveler would stop in their town, and the coins were what they would use to pay for a meal and a bed to sleep in. At the end of each month, the villagers would gather up whatever coins they had, and Master Lewyn would ride out with them. A fortnight later, he would return with a cart full of whatever supplies the village had needed. She wished she knew how much value it would have. Sooner or later, she would need a meal and a bed.

She took the coin and walked back over to her meager cache of supplies and placed it there. Then she returned to Roddin. She took his arms, said a short prayer to Amman in her brother's name, and dragged him to the base of the tree. She quickly used the knife to brush aside as much of the loose earth as she could, and then she dropped him in the shallow grave. She said one more prayer to Amman, and then began pushing the dirt over him.

She stopped a moment later. "I'm sorry, Roddin. I'm sorry, Amman," she said. She knelt

down and reached for the belt around Roddin's waist, the one that held his knife. "I will need this too."

Once she had removed it, she finished burying him and returned to her supplies, looking them over.

The clothes on her back, a knife, a bow and eight arrows in a quiver, a crystal clasp, the strange stone, and one silver coin. She had no idea how she would survive with so few belongings, but she was determined to do it. She placed the crystal, the stone, and the coin in the quiver with the arrows, and slung it on her back. Then she took Roddin's belt and put it around her waist. The clasp was too large for her, so it hung oddly from her hips, but it was good enough as a place to put the knife, in case she needed it in a hurry.

Ready, she took one last look back at Roddin's grave, and then at Lia's corpse. She didn't fear death, not anymore. She would make *him* fear *her*, or die trying.

CHAPTER NINE

Silas

When Constable Penticott arrived to lead Silas from his cell, he barely recognized the old man. Gone was the homeless drunkard with the wild beard and the stained, disgusting clothes. In his place was a proud man in black cottons with deep set eyes and a tight, square jaw. He was still an old man, but he looked ten years younger, and he stood with a confidence that reminded Penticott of himself.

"Silas," he said. "You look well."

Silas stared at him for a few seconds, then spoke. "I feel like a new man," he said.

Penticott smiled. "Our baths have been known to do that," he joked. "I'm sure getting away from the ale for a few days hasn't hurt."

There was no humor in Silas' expression. "It hurt like Heden."

Penticott dropped his eyes, taken off-guard. "In any case, I have good news. Roque has arrived from Elling, and is waiting upstairs with the soldiers. All you need to do is come with us, name Calum as a Cursed, and return here with me. We'll both sign the dispensary documentation, and the reward is yours."

Silas didn't say anything, making the Constable even more uncomfortable.

"Are you feeling all right, Silas?"

"I'm well, Constable," he replied. "I haven't felt this right in years."

"Then follow me." Penticott motioned with his fingers, and they headed for the stairs.

"Roque is waiting outside with the horses. You do know how to ride, don't you?"

Silas nodded. It had been a while, but he had ridden before.

They reached the top of the steps, and walked through the offices. When they reached the foyer, the steward handed Penticott his sword.

"Thank you, Malcum," Penticott said, strapping it around his waist. "Perhaps I'll even get to use it."

The steward rang a bell, the twin doors of the office swung open, and Silas got his first look at Roque.

So young, he thought. The Mediator couldn't have been more than twenty years old, with a fresh, pale face, thick lips, and dark hair. He was already astride his black warhorse, his robes swaying rhythmically in a light breeze. He didn't look like a killer, but Silas noted the polished sword tucked into the saddle.

"He looks young, doesn't he?" Penticott whispered. "Mediators don't seem to age like the rest of us. He's nearly forty years old."

Silas could hardly believe it. Penticott motioned him over to the Mediator.

"Sir Roque," Penticott said. "This is Silas Morningstar. He is the one who discovered the boy."

Roque turned his head, gave a half-smile, and held out his hand. "I am grateful for your service to *him*."

Silas took the man's hand and gave it a light shake. The Mediator was wearing a silver ring that held what looked like a perfectly round red river stone in it. Silas wasn't sure why, but he felt like he had seen the ring before.

"Shall we?" Penticott asked. He put his foot in the stirrup of another black warhorse and

climbed up into the saddle.

"Over here, Morningstar." The guard was holding the reins of a third horse.

Silas walked over, stopping in front of it. He looked it in the eye, sizing it up, and then leaned in to whisper in its ear. "When I say to run, you run." The horse shook its mane, and Silas leaped from stirrup to saddle like an expert.

They rode through the town, Roque, Penticott, Silas, and six of *his* soldiers. When the townspeople saw them coming, they ran inside and closed the doors. Everyone knew what business the Mediators were in, and none wanted to fall under their gaze.

They stopped a short distance from the Old Oak and Penticott brought his horse even with Silas'. "The two of us and two of the men will confront them. Roque will wait for the signal to come inside."

"What's the signal?" Silas asked.

Penticott held up a round sliver of metal that looked like a coin. "When I tap this, it will send the tap to an identical coin that Roque has around his neck. He will feel the vibration, and know to come."

Silas had never heard of such a device before, and he would have been amazed, but he had other things on his mind.

The Old Oak was on the east bank, in a quieter section of the town. It was one of the larger taverns in Root, with four floors above the main tavern and a separate stable that could house twenty horses. Silas had been there plenty of times before to keep his memories from returning. Seeing it again now, he wished that he could forget once more.

Everything stopped when Penticott, Silas, and the two soldiers walked in. It was mid-afternoon, and the tavern was crowded, but as soon as their boots had fallen onto the wood floor,

every head turned their way, and every conversation stopped. Silas scanned the room, finding Selene Hess over in the corner near the back. She was a young woman, almost too young to be a mother, with long blonde hair, a small face, and a petite frame.

"Selene Hess," Penticott announced. "We are looking for Selene Hess."

There were a few heartbeats of silence, and then one of the patrons stood. "She's over there," he said, pointing back to her.

"Selene, my dear," Penticott said, looking at her. "Where is your son?"

Silas could see the fear explode in her eyes. She stood motionless for a second, trying to decide what to do. But he knew what she was going to do. She was going to resist, because she was a mother who loved her son, and she wasn't about to let *him* take the boy away.

"Somewhere safe," she said. She tried to sound strong, but there was too much fear in her heart.

"You are aware, my dear, that aiding a Cursed is punishable by death?" Penticott started walking towards her, drawing his sword.

"I'll die before I tell you," she croaked, holding her serving tray up to her chest, as if it could protect her.

"I saw the little bastard running around here not two minutes ago," another patron said, an ugly old woman in a worn silk dress. If Selene Hess could have killed someone with a look, it would have been her.

Penticott sheathed his sword and turned back to Silas and the soldiers. "There, that wasn't so hard, was it? Silas, you have claimed that Calum Hess is Cursed. Do you hereby swear upon your life that this is the truth?"

Silas took a deep breath. His throat had gone dry, yet he found himself calm. He looked

at Penticott, and then at Selene, and he shook his head. "No," he said. "I..."

Calum Hess burst into the room through the door to the kitchen, his arm out towards the Constable, and a red tear below his eye. Silas watched Penticott get shoved away from Selene by an invisible hand, sending him sprawling onto one of the tables.

"Leave her alone," Calum cried.

"Calum," Selene shouted. She started to run towards him.

Penticott shoved himself from the table and back to his feet, drawing his sword. He turned towards the soldiers. "Burn this entire place down if you have to, but get that boy!" He reached into his pocket, taking out the metal disc.

Calum turned and ran back into the kitchen, Selene right behind him. Silas let out his breath, feeling a calm strength take over. He knew what he had to do.

First, he had to stop Penticott from summoning Roque and the rest of the soldiers. He dropped to his knees and reached back, finding the small dagger that the soldiers kept in their boots. In one smooth motion, he pulled it from its sheathe and flung it at the Constable. The blade was true, impaling his hand and forcing him to drop the disc.

Penticott grasped the wrist of his damaged hand with the other, and turned towards them in time to see Silas dance backwards to get behind the soldiers, and then lash out with his foot, cracking it into the calf of the one on the left and forcing him to fall forward onto his face. The second soldier started to grab for his sword, which gave Silas the opening he needed to spring up and slam his open hand up into the side of the man's head, causing him to collapse.

"Silas?" Penticott said, trying to understand why anyone would defy them. "Get him," he shouted at the people in the tavern. "Get him or you'll be sent to the ore mines."

Silas heard the shouts, and he bent over to take the fallen soldier's sword and made a run

for the kitchen. A heavy young man beat him to the door, but he was a merchant, not a soldier, and Silas had no trouble dispatching him by smacking him on the head with the hilt of the sword. He hopped over the man and through the kitchen doors, searching for Calum and Selene.

"Not here," he said, rushing past the cooks and through the rear door, into the back alley. He popped out just in time to see a wisp of golden hair vanish behind the door to the stable. A second later he heard the horses approaching from the front of the building. He had hoped he had damaged the disc, but that didn't seem to be the case.

Silas ran towards the stables, following Calum and Selene. He heard shouting from inside the Old Oak, and then screaming, and he cursed Penticott for his heavy handedness.

"Stop," came a cry from the end of the alley. Silas turned around to see a soldier there, still on his horse, his bow trained on him.

Silas closed his eyes and took a breath, letting his body remember what his mind couldn't. When he opened them, he ran towards the archer, raising his stolen sword behind his right shoulder.

The soldier fired. Silas skipped to the left and brought the sword down, splitting the arrow and sending it off course. He reached the soldier while he was still trying to string the next one, leaping and planting his foot on the side of the horse, using it as a ladder to get up to the man and bring the sword around through his head. He used his purchase to spin, heading back in the direction of the stable while the now headless corpse tilted and rolled out of the saddle.

Silas was halfway down the alley when Penticott came through the door from the kitchen, slamming into him and sending him tumbling to the ground.

"What in the name of Amman do you think you're doing, Morningstar?" Penticott shouted. He had pulled the dagger from his right hand, but it was still raining blood. He held his

sword in his left.

Silas flipped himself over and used the sword to climb to his feet. "What I should have been doing all of these years," he replied. "I don't know who I am, and I don't know everything I've done, but I'm not going to let you take the boy. What *he's* doing... it isn't right."

Penticott smiled. "That isn't for you to decide." He moved in, swinging his sword awkwardly in his left hand, holding the right close to his chest.

"You can't beat me," Silas said, batting the other man's blade away without effort. "Why are you trying?"

"I'm already dead unless I kill you," he replied. "We serve for life, and failure is forbidden." He stepped forward, making another weak attack. Silas blocked his thrust, kicked the sword out of his hand, and put his own blade to the Constable's throat.

"Do it," Penticott said.

Silas took the blade away and shoved Penticott to the ground. "I won't murder a defenseless man. Not ever again."

He turned and ran for the stables.

He knew he was too late as soon as he entered. The smell of burning flesh filled his nostrils, and he saw both Calum and Selene laying next to each other on the hay, their bodies still smoldering.

"I thought I recognized you," Roque said. The Mediator was kneeling in front of the bodies, a tear of blood trailing from his eye. "But I didn't believe it could be so."

"You're Cursed?" Silas started backing towards the door, but it swung closed.

"You can't leave, I'm afraid." Roque got to his feet, and took a cloth from his pocket, using it to wipe his face. "Especially now that you know my secret. Of course, you already knew

my secret once. You just don't remember."

Silas stared at Roque's face, trying to place it. "You know who I am? I mean, who I really am?"

Roque nodded, his expression pained. "I do. We've known one another for a long time. We were even friends, once." He knelt down again, putting his hand to the hay. "I'm sorry, my friend. All these years I thought you were dead. You should have stayed that way." His hand began to glow, and the hay began to burn.

Silas raised his sword in front of him. "You're going to kill me?"

The Mediator got back up and walked to the front door of the stable. "I'm truly sorry," he said again. He stepped out of the door and pushed it closed.

The fire began to spread along the hay on the ground, finding its way over to the wooden beams supporting the structure within seconds. Silas ran back to the alley door and pulled, trying to force it open. It didn't budge. He ran to the front door and slammed into it, trying to make it open, but it too was being held.

He took his shirt and held it up to his mouth so he could breathe, and looked around for a way to get out, not finding one. The horses in the stable started to stomp and whine, beginning to worry about their own safety.

"Mamma?"

The voice was little more than a cracked whisper, but Silas heard it. He ran over to where Calum and Selene lay, only inches from the fire. The heat of it threatened to burn him alive, but if the boy wasn't dead he would do what he could for him.

"Calum?" Silas kneeled down next to him. His eyes were open, but his breathing was shallow.

"Mamma?" There was panic there, worry for his mother, more so than for himself.

"Calum, listen to me," Silas said. He coughed on the smoke and ducked low to get to clearer air. He could feel the heat of the flames getting more intense, and he knew he didn't have much time. "She's dead, Calum. They killed her."

The boy looked directly at Silas, all of the fear draining away from him. "*His* man in the robes. He was Cursed. I'm going to die."

Silas took Calum's hand in his own, giving it a gentle squeeze. "I'm sorry, Calum. I wish that I could help you. But you can help me. I'm trapped in here. I'm going to die too, if I don't get out."

"Save you?"

"Yes, Calum. I saw you throw the Constable. Can you throw the door open?"

Closer to the front door, one of the beams collapsed, taking a portion of the roof with it and leaving precious little space outside of their's left to burn.

"If you help me get out of here, I promise you I'll avenge you and your mother. I'll stop *him* from hurting any more mothers and children. Please, Calum."

The boy coughed, choking on the smoke, and then tried to push himself to a sitting position. Silas pulled on his hand, helping him up.

The front doorway was blocked by the collapsed part of the stable, and the rear door was on fire. Calum turned towards the back wall. There were pens there, with horses stomping and kicking and trying to get out. He held his arm out towards them, and one of the horses was driven back with such force that it crashed through the wood of the barn, creating a hole more than big enough for Silas to get through. As soon as it was done, he began coughing again, and fell to the ground.

Silas marveled at the display for just an instant. He knew only that Cursed were to be taken to *him* or killed, not that they had such power. Although Roque had suggested he had once known more.

He put his hand to the boy's face, cupping it tenderly. "Thank you, Calum. I will keep my promise."

Then he got back to his feet, hunched over with his shirt in his mouth, and made a run for the opening. Fire licked at his legs as he stumbled over it, but they didn't catch the flame. He nearly fell out of the hole the horse had made, and he could have laughed when he found the surprised mount hadn't bolted. As he pulled himself up onto the mare, he heard Calum shout.

"Remember."

CHAPTER TEN

Eryn

The first day on her own was the hardest for Eryn. After leaving the clearing where she had buried her brother, she headed back towards Watertown in search of the stream they had crossed. Her throat was so dry she thought it might crack and bleed, and her head pounded with exhaustion.

Every step was a challenge, and she was terrified that there were more of *his* soldiers nearby, stalking the woods in search of them, waiting to shoot her with an arrow or stab her with their swords. Every step she fought to be brave, and she tried not to think about her mother and father. She tried not to think about Roddin.

"They're resting in the arms of Amman now," she told herself.

She nearly cried when she heard the clinking of the water running over the river stones, and she forgot her need to be cautious. She ran to the stream and kneeled down, leaning over the water and scooping it up into her mouth. It was cold and refreshing; the best water she had ever tasted in her life.

She drank her fill, wishing she had a bladder or a bottle. Then she stood up, wiped her mouth, and tried to decide what to do next. She had been so intent on finding the water, she realized she had no plan after that. All she knew was that she needed to get away from Watertown, and out of the Whistling Woods.

She considered the stream, and looked up to find the sun. She knew it rose to the east and

set to the west, and she knew that her house faced the forest, and the sun never rose or set in the front of her house. The sun was rising in the same direction the stream was flowing. As long as she followed it west, she should be moving away from her village. But towards what?

She didn't know, and she wasn't going to find out by standing there. At least if she stayed with the stream she would have access to fresh water, and she was sure there would be berry bushes along the way. If only she had listened to Roddin more closely when he had tried to tell her what he was learning from Master Lewyn.

Eryn started walking. At first she concentrated on every step, watching where she put her feet, trying to make sure she didn't land on any branches or make any noise, or leave marks in the ground that *his* soldiers could follow. It was tiring though, and slow, and she wanted to be out of the forest and away from Watertown as fast as possible. She wanted to get somewhere, anywhere that wasn't where she was, because all she could think about was her family, and how alone she was, and that she was getting hungry. Besides, the soldiers rode horses, and horses were certainly loud. She was sure to hear them before they could hear her.

She walked for two hours before she came across an berry bush, and she helped herself to a great big handful of the large red berries. She wondered how far she had gone, because the stream had stayed a stream, and the woods had stayed the woods, and she didn't feel like she had actually gone anywhere at all.

"How big is this forest, anyway?" she asked. She was sure Roddin or Papa had probably told her once, but she hadn't been paying attention.

"About two days' ride north to south, and a half of a day east to west, Eryn. Depending on the horse."

She jerked her head up, gripped with a sudden fear. Master Lewyn stepped out from

behind a tree.

"You're near the eastern-most edge, where this stream meets up with the Baden River, which flows south to north to Elling Lake, but the Baden runs through the wood also. Did you know Elling is where the Overlord of our province rules from? You should be more careful where you step, child," he said. "You left tracks that even a troll could follow. In any case, you shouldn't be wandering out in the woods alone. The forest can be a dangerous place."

Eryn stared at Roddin's teacher. He was a short, older man with grey hair and a trimmed beard, small blue eyes and a wide nose. He was wearing the same kind of brown leathers that her brother had worn, and he had a knife on one hip, and a short sword on the other.

"They killed him," she said, her words shaking as she fought to hold back the pain and the tears. She had known Master Lewyn her entire life, and he was beloved in the village for his kindness and wisdom. If there was anyone who could understand, it had to be him. "Roddin. *His* soldiers killed him. My parents too."

Master Lewyn looked sad. "I know, child. I'm very sorry for your loss." He took a few steps towards her. Even though she trusted him, she was still frightened, so she backed away.

"They wanted to take me away," she said. "They tried to kill me."

"Eryn, you must listen to me. *His* soldiers are looking for you, even now. They returned to the village late last night. They were angry, because two of their own, and their Mediator did not return."

"Mediator?" She knew he must be talking about Lia, though she had never heard the word before.

"Yes. The Mediator is the one who speaks to the Cursed for *him*. They claim that the Mediators are kind, and that they wish to help those who are afflicted, but I don't believe them."

"It was a Mediator that killed Roddin," she said. "She was Cursed."

Master Lewyn's eyes widened with surprise. "Cursed, you say? Perhaps you are mistaken?"

She shook her head. "She killed Roddin with lightning. It came from a metal staff she was carrying. Her eyes were bleeding."

Master Lewyn flicked his eyes around the woods, and he put his finger to his lips the way Roddin had. Eryn was completely still, listening along with the man. After a minute, he took his finger away.

"Eryn, I need you to come with me. You're in great danger. The soldiers are searching for you. When they find you, they'll kill you."

She already knew that much. "Why would you want to help me? If they see you with me, they'll kill you too."

He took a deep breath, and cast his eyes to the ground. "I had a daughter once, many years ago. You remind me of her. On her eleventh birthday, she was playing with our dog, Lansa. I was sitting nearby, sharpening my knife. One moment, Lansa was alive and well, running, and barking, and playing. The next, she was dead. My daughter, she touched her, and her heart just stopped beating."

Master Lewyn looked up then, his eyes filling with tears. "I would have tried to hide her, but others saw it too. We had no choice but to send for *his* soldiers. They came a few days later, and their Mediator convinced my girl to go with her. It broke my heart to watch them ride away. Of course, I never saw her again. I don't want you to suffer the same fate that she did."

Eryn had heard stories like this before, but she hadn't known Master Lewyn had ever had any children. She found her own eyes becoming moist from his sad tale. "I'm sorry for your

pain," she said.

"Thank you, child," he replied. "Please, come with me, and we'll get you out of here. I can take you as far as the road, and I can give you what little coin I have." He shook a small bag tied to his hip. "It isn't much, but it should buy you a few meals."

Eryn smiled. "I don't know how I can every repay you for this," she said. "You have always been so kind to me, and to Roddin."

His smile was heavy. "He was like a son to me, that boy. Come, we need to track away from the stream. They'll be expecting you to stay near water. I only hope I can get you to the road before they can assemble a watch to prevent you from leaving."

He waved his hand, and started walking north, away from Watertown and the stream. His movements were silent and careful. "Mind your feet, child. Don't leave any tracks for them to follow. Step where I step."

"Okay," she said, and she followed behind him, making sure her feet landed almost exactly where his did.

They walked for over an hour, not a word shared between them, with the woodsman pointing and directing her with his hands, and stopping every so often to listen. Eryn was nervous at first, but she knew that he had been walking the Whistling Wood for years, and if anyone knew how to survive out there, it was him. She began to relax and follow his instructions almost automatically. At last they reached a large, moss-covered stone, and Master Lewyn called for them to stop.

"It is out of place here," Eryn said.

Master Lewyn unslung his quiver and put it on the ground. He leaned over it and pushed some of the arrows aside, searching. "Hmm... Oh, you mean the stone?"

"Yes." She stood under it, and looked up. It had to be at least twenty feet tall, and equally wide. It wasn't buried in the ground, but resting in a rut, as though it had slid some distance through the wood before stopping in that spot.

He found what he had been looking for, pulling out a small loaf of bread. He tore it in half, and handed a piece to her. "I call that the Giant's Ball," he said. "The shape of it, and the way it is sitting here, with no other stones around it that are so large... it is as if a giant threw it here."

"It's incredible," she said, taking a big bite of the bread. She had never been more grateful for such a simple meal. She took her own quiver from her back and placed it next to her, then sat with her back against the Ball. "How long will it take to get to the road?"

Master Lewyn took a bite of the bread, and then returned his quiver to his back. "We've gone north a little bit to get away from the stream. Now we will head west towards the Baden River. It's only half of a day's walk, maybe a little bit more from here."

The thought of being away from Watertown made her happy. She didn't want to ever have to go back to see what had become of her home. "Aren't you going to be in trouble for helping me?"

He shook his head, and then turned in a circle, searching the trees. Satisfied, he came over, standing a few feet in front of her. "No. *His* soldiers sent me out here to find you. I can just go back tomorrow morning, and tell them I saw no signs of your passing."

Eryn considered that while she brought the bread up to her mouth. "Do you think they'll belie.. Oh." The bread slipped out of her hand, falling to the moss below. "I'm not usually so clumsy." She reached down to pick it up, and noticed something shimmering in the dirt, almost buried by time.

"What's this?" She picked up the bread in her left hand, and then used her right to scrape away at the moss and earth around the object.

"It's probably just a bit of quartz," Master Lewyn said. She noticed he was looking around again.

She scraped some more of the dirt away, and then dug her nails under it, hooking her prize. A ring, she saw. A gold ring, with a small, clear gemstone set on top of it. How had it come to be out here?

Eryn held it up for Master Lewyn to examine, but she saw his attention was elsewhere.

"Master Lewyn, look at this," she said, holding it out with excitement.

He turned to her, his expression tight and tense. "What is it?" he asked, his voice unsteady.

Something was wrong.

She pulled the ring back and slid it onto her index finger. The fit was almost perfect. "Just a ring," she said. "Are you okay?"

He smiled, a tight smile that pushed his lips together. The corners of his mouth were twitching. "I'm fine, child."

She didn't like it, and something in her was telling her she needed to get out of there. She started to get to her feet, when Master Lewyn reached out and took her by the wrist.

"Don't move, Eryn," he growled. "It isn't safe. We just need to stay for a few minutes more."

Now he was scaring her. "I want to go, now!" She tried to pull her wrist away, but he gripped it tighter.

"I'm sorry, child," he said. "I can't let you go." His eyes became moist and tears rolled

down his cheek. "You have to understand, they said they would kill everyone in the village if I didn't find you."

Eryn felt her anger begin to build. He had tricked her! Sweet, kind, Master Lewyn had lied to her, and led her right into a trap. But could she really blame him? They were threatening the entire village, as they had the night before when they had first come looking for her but didn't know who she was. Still, she had seen what *his* soldiers were like. She knew it wouldn't be as simple as Master Lewyn had made it sound.

"Master Lewyn, you have to let me go. They're going to kill everyone in the village anyway. Please, come with me, and we'll get away. We'll run away together."

The woodsman shook his head. "I know you're afraid child, but you have to think of the village. My wife..."

Her anger faded. She couldn't find it in her heart to blame him, but that didn't mean she was going to just let them kill her. "I'm sorry, Master Lewyn. I have to go. Don't you see, this is what will happen to every Cursed, every village forever and ever if somebody doesn't find a way to stop it. I'm going to find a way. I made a promise to my mother that I would survive."

Instead of trying to pull her arm away, she grabbed his arm with her hand, and pulled him towards her. She was strong for a girl, stronger than he had expected, and she managed to take him off balance. He hit his head on the rock and let go.

Eryn jumped to her feet, grabbed her quiver and started to run. A hand grabbed her ankle, and she fell forward into the dirt.

"No," Master Lewyn shouted. "You're going to stay right here. The soldiers will be here any minute. I can hear the horses coming now."

Eryn listened. She could hear them too. She had to escape.

Master Lewyn pulled her leg, bringing her closer and trying to get on top of her, to sit on her and hold her down. Desperate, she kicked and thrashed, managing to connect with his forearm and get him to let go again. She turned over and pulled herself to her feet. The woodsman stood in front of her, his knife in his hand.

"Please, Eryn," he said, his breathing heavy. "I don't want to hurt you."

"They're going to kill me," she replied. "What does it matter if you hurt me?"

What did it matter? She wasn't afraid of his knife. Something worse was coming for her. She ran towards him, throwing her body against his. She caught him off guard, and knocked him to the ground, the knife falling out of his grasp. She punched him, once, twice, three times, leaving his lip and nose bloody. She was too light though, and when he rocked himself she almost fell off.

The knife was in her reach, so she grabbed it. Master Lewyn rocked again, pushing her up and back, nearly tossing her off completely. She was straddling his legs now, and he was pulling them out from under her.

There was a single moment where she didn't think she could use the knife, to stab him with it and get him away from her. It was a moment when she remembered the kind old man who would sit at a fire and tell stories, whose wife would mend their clothes and bake pies with them. It was a moment that she had to leave in the past, to rest with her family in the ashes of Watertown.

She brought the knife down, plunging it into his chest.

He grunted, and stopped struggling, his face a mask of shock. He wasn't dead, yet, but all of the fight had left him.

"What does it mean?" he asked as she got to her feet, pulling the coin purse from his hip

and grabbing her bow and quiver. "That the Mediators are Cursed?"

"I don't know," she said. "But I'm going to find out."

"Good luck then, Eryn," he said, his voice fading with his life. "I'm sorry. I had no choice."

She started to run, her eyes threatening to fill with tears again. Not because she had killed him, but because he had felt he had no choice.

He leaves so many without choices.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Silas

Silas kicked his heels into the mare, urging her forward. She was well-trained, and she moved immediately at his request. To his left, the fire still burned fiercely, and he could hear the screaming of the rest of the horses as the flames began to overtake them.

"Damn that man," he cursed, thinking of Roque. He had sounded so apologetic, right before he had set fire to the stables. Never mind that he had just killed two people, and at least half a dozen steeds.

There was a large pen behind the stables, where the Old Oak and many of the other nearby taverns kept their livestock. Silas aimed the horse that way at a trot, trying to look inconspicuous to anyone who happened to wander outside.

"If anyone wanders outside at a time like this," he muttered. Nobody wanted to be witness to *his* soldiers collecting a Cursed.

It was a fact that cost him.

"He escaped," someone shouted from down the street. Silas turned his head, and saw a group of soldiers on horseback, coming his way.

"Too damn obvious out here," he said. He took the flat of his blade and smacked it against the mare's rear, causing it to launch into a gallop. He heard the soldiers gather momentum behind him. "I hope you're a good runner," he cried.

Hooves pounded the earth, and they headed straight for the livestock pen. "And a good

jumper," he shouted as they reached the fence. The mare bunched itself up and sprang, clearing the gate with a few inches to spare. Silas smacked his tailbone as they landed, unused to the force.

Pigs, chickens, and lambs scattered in front of them, and Silas steered the horse hard, turning it left and right in as much of a zigzag as he could manage, sure that the soldiers behind him would be stringing their bows and preparing a volley of arrows.

Word would spread quickly of this man who had defied an army, and within minutes he would be boxed in. Within hours the entire contingent of *his* soldiers assigned to Root would be searching for him, and if he didn't do something fast, he would be captured by nightfall. He could only wish his death would be quick, but he had no doubt Penticott, or whoever replaced the man, would want revenge for his disobedience and lawlessness. There was no clean end there, only painful torture.

He reached the other side of the pen and the horse leaped again, once more clearing the barrier. Silas heard the arrows now, whistling towards him and thunking into the wooden fence. He knew it wasn't because the soldiers were poor shots, but because firing an arrow from a moving horse was hard, no matter how good you were.

He turned the horse to the right, heading it down Fillion Road. The dirt street had been named after Olik Fillion, a wealthy merchant who owned many of the storefronts along the road. There was only one way he might get out of this alive. He knew he needed to make it to the Wharf.

To do that, he had to get past the two soldiers who rode out in front of him, one hundred feet ahead, their bows coming level in a hurry.

Shooting arrows from moving horses was hard. Firing from stationary mounts was much

easier. Silas ducked down low, trying to get as much of his body behind that of the horse as he could. There was nowhere to turn around, and no way to go anywhere but forward. He would either be shot dead right now, or he would smash his way through their barricade.

He was close enough to hear the twang of the bowstrings. A second later the horse let out a shrill cry, and he felt the front legs lock and then collapse. He picked himself up off the mare so he could see ahead. The soldiers were still twenty feet away, and they were preparing another round. His ride was about to fall face-first, two arrows fired perfectly into the heart of the animal.

Looking back, he didn't know how he had done it. If he would have told the tale that very night, he wouldn't be able to explain. In the moment, he didn't question. With smoothness and grace, he pulled his feet up and balanced on the back of the horse, shifting his weight and bringing the sword up ahead of him as it began tumbling to the ground. He allowed the momentum to pull him forward, throwing him forcefully towards the two soldiers, still in the middle of notching another arrow.

Then he was in the air, sword raised over his head, approaching the men fast. He could see their shocked expressions when he arrived, and his sword came down and around in a wide arc. He felt the blade biting into the flesh of their necks, first the one on the right, and then the one on the left, his arm getting yanked by the resistance of bone. He was forced to let the blade go in order to come down, tucking his front shoulder under and hitting the ground with more agility than befitted a man his age.

He rolled off the velocity and jumped to his feet, turning to check on the soldiers. They had both fallen from their horses. One still had the sword wedged in him.

Silas shook off the pain in his left arm and ran back to the men, reaching down and retrieving the blade, and then pulling himself onto the saddled warhorse.

"Thanks for the ride," he said to the corpses, whirling the steed about and heading away. He wished he was safe, but he still heard shouting; the soldiers at his rear catching up to their downed comrades.

He pounded through the town, leading the soldiers through Root, and taking a circular route to the Wharf. He needed to lose them before he dared enter the area.

Silas screamed and shouted as he crossed through Apple Square, a smaller outpost on the east bank where a small crowd of people were buying fresh produce brought in from the nearby farms. His new mount was a soldier's steed, and it charged towards and through the crowds without hesitation, forcing the people to jump out of its path before they were trampled. The soldiers chasing him were falling further and further behind, his lighter clothes proving to be very beneficial in the overall speed and stamina of the mount.

As he turned the corner out of Apple Square, a soldier jumped out in front of the horse, sword raised. Silas knew what he intended to do, so he pulled back hard on the reins and shouted at the horse, a command he didn't know he knew and couldn't recall after he had said it. The horse reared up and lashed out at the soldier, catching him in the face with a hoof and snapping his neck. Silas urged the beast forward once more, and rode for two more blocks, approaching the outer edge of the Wharf. Seeing a wagon of fruit up ahead, he slipped over so both his legs were on the right side of the saddle and held on, balancing awkwardly and waiting for just the right moment.

"Good luck, my friend," he said to the horse when they reached the wagon. He let go of the saddle and the reins, allowing himself to fall face-first into the assorted fruit. It squished below him, coating him with sticky juice and soaking through his clothes, but it also broke his fall. The owner, seeing Silas, started running over, until the older man held up his blade. Then

Silas turned and ran down the alley he had aimed for, while the horse continued to run.

The Root Wharf was hardly a wharf at all. For one, it didn't actually rest on the shore of the Baden, but rather sat towards the east wall of Root, away from the river. For another, it wasn't a center of commerce, but instead the place where the most underhanded of dealings occurred in the town. It was the home of the underground market; the thieves, mercenaries, assassins, prostitutes, druggers and thugs. For travelers not looking for services there, it was merely the block of taverns, inns, and unmarked doors between Cistern and Essen streets. For everyone else, they knew to ask for the Wharf.

Silas knew about the Wharf. He had spent a few nights there, drinking himself to forgetfulness and waking up in a waste-filled gutter. The soldiers would look for him there too, of course, but if he had enough coin or trade, he would be able to find someone who would take him in and not rat him out. Reputation was surprisingly important to the underbelly of society.

So it was that he ran that way, three more blocks on foot, praying to Amman that he wouldn't cross the paths of any soldiers before he reached it.

Amman was with him, and he slowed to a walk as he reached the east side of Cistern, where pairs of large men stood on each corner, looking like they were just hanging around and talking, but really keeping an eye on everyone who went in and out of the Wharf. He nodded to them on the way past, and then hurried his walk until he reached a simple wood door, one of many attached to simple wood buildings. The door was painted red, and a bucket sat on the ground next to it, filled with water.

Silas knelt down and dipped his hands in the water, using it to wash the fruit juice and dirt away from his face. He took another handful and ran it through his hair, slicking the length of it back out of his eyes. Having made himself presentable, he turned the bucket over and

knocked.

The door opened right away. He knew they had been watching him from the moment he approached it, though he wasn't sure where from. The inside was dark, and filled with smoke, making it difficult to see where he was going. He had no choice though. He stepped in.

The door closed behind him, and someone took up a position at his back. He was in a small shop, with wood planked floors that led to a basic counter, behind which sat a heavy man in a red tunic and trousers. A candle flickered next to him, allowing him to read.

"Silas, is that you?" he asked, without looking up. "You smell like a whore."

Just because Silas wasn't interested in joining the underworld didn't mean he had no knowledge of it. He had met Rappett before, when he had sold him a pair of boots he had lifted from a nearby tavern. The man couldn't have needed them anyway, to have left them sitting below his table, instead of keeping them on his feet.

"I had a run in with a fruit wagon," Silas said, coming closer. Rappett looked up at him now, his small eyes taking him in.

"I see that. You're covered in seeds." He raised a pointed nose in the air and took a couple of breaths. "What I don't smell is ale. Oh, and you've shaved!"

"I've been dry for five days," Silas said. Or was it six? "I was locked up at the Constable's Office."

Rappett laughed. "What for?" he asked.

Silas sighed. "It's a long story. The short one is that I need somewhere to stay hidden, and I need safe passage out of Root."

"You also need some new clothes," Rappett said. "What do you have to offer?"

Silas stepped forward, raised the sword, and placed it down on the table. "This belonged

to one of *his* soldiers. You know you won't find better quality."

Rappett looked down at it, then pulled the book out from under it. It clunked to the countertop. He lifted the book up and slapped it closed, bending down and putting it under the counter. Only then did he pick up the sword, sticking it into the candle light and looking it up and down. He put his thumb along the edge, and smiled when it drew blood with hardly an effort.

"You aren't lying," he said. "I can get good coin from the resistance for a blade like this. Tell me you killed the soldier to get it, and I'll even get you a nice warm bath and a woman for the night."

Murderer, the voice in his head whispered.

"I killed the soldier," he said, remorseful. He didn't want to have to kill, only protect the ones he knew were innocent. He'd had enough of death. He wondered if that was what he had tried so hard to forget.

"I'll take your protection, passage from Root, a warm bath, a change of clothes, and a sword. It doesn't have to be a good sword, just something that will hurt someone if I hit them with it."

Rappett laughed and shook his head. "This whole time I thought you were just some crazy old drunk. Now it turns out some of those stories you told me about being able to fight were actually true?"

Silas didn't remember telling him stories, but should that come as a surprise? He knew he could fight. He knew he had been one of *his* soldiers once, and somehow he had gotten out. Penticott said they served for life. How had he managed to escape? Or was there more to it than that? His hand absently drifted to his chest, where the long scar angled across his body.

"I'm almost as surprised as you are," he replied. Rappett laughed even harder at that, though Silas hadn't intended it to be funny.

"Follow me, Silas," Rappett said, pushing his bulk up off the stool he was sitting on. "Trevon, take the sword over to Elia's. Make sure you fetch me top coin."

Rappett led him through the back and into a storage room, filled with boxes of supplies like ropes and candle wax. He pushed a few of the boxes out of the way, revealing a hidden door, which he opened for Silas.

"After you," he said.

Silas climbed down at least thirty feet. When he came out, he was in a well-lit corridor, part of the network of tunnels that connected every building in the Wharf to every other building.

Rappett followed behind him, huffing and puffing when he reached the bottom. "Amazing, isn't it?" he asked. "Even more amazing is if the soldiers find any one of the trap doors, we can cause a collapse of that part of the tunnel before they can get anywhere else. Of course, the soldiers who know about the doors are paid well to keep *their* trap doors shut." He laughed at that, and took the lead.

They had gone what Silas guessed was two or three streets when they climbed another ladder. It opened up into a small room filled with wine barrels and kept behind an orange door.

Rappett knocked on it, three quick taps followed by three slow ones. The door opened, and a barely dressed woman appeared, her nearly see-through fabric made all the more diaphanous by the light of the candles behind her.

"I said no women," Silas barked. His mind cast back to the memory of the ship, sailing off over the great sea.

"Don't be stupid," Rappett said. "This is the best place to keep you safe. Soldiers tend to

get... distracted when they come to visit Madam Toll's."

The woman reached out and grabbed Silas' arm, pulling him in through the door.

"He's paying for safe-keeping, a change of clothes, and a warm bath," Rappett told the woman. "You'll get all of that in there, Silas, and not a single thing more."

CHAPTER TWELVE

Eryn

Eryn ran as fast as she could, pushing through branch and bush, searching for somewhere, anywhere she could hide. She heard the soldiers' shouting in the distance, certain that they had reached the Giant's Ball and discovered Master Lewyn there. She hoped he had died before they arrived.

She wasn't sure where she was going, but Master Lewyn had said that Elling city was to the north. She knew cities were big, bigger than anything she could even imagine, and to her that meant it would be easy to hide there, as long as she didn't use her Curse. She also knew that there were places of learning there, buildings filled with books. She couldn't remember what they were called, but Papa had told her they existed, that he had been to the city once before he had met Mother, and had seen it for himself. She knew that story was true, because he had brought a book back from the city, and used it to teach them to read. The subject had been seeds and planting, and it would have bored her to tears had she not been so excited just to be able to know what it said.

In any case, if she was going to fight against *him*, she would have to know something about *him*. Perhaps she could find her answers there.

The ground moved steadily beneath her feet, and for the first half hour she kept a strong pace. Her legs were accustomed to standing, and they were strong from lifting, but she didn't have the stamina of a runner, and she soon began to tire. She stopped and listened, hearing the

crashing of brush that meant the horses were still nearby, and started to run again, looking around frantically for somewhere to hide.

She saw trees, and bushes, and rocks. The rocks were too small to hide behind, and the trees she could climb, but she was afraid of becoming trapped up in one with no hope to escape. She couldn't outrun men on horseback though. She had only made it this far because they had stopped to check on the woodsman, and because they weren't sure which direction she had headed. Her legs were beginning to burn from the exertion, and now that she was away from the stream, she was getting thirsty again.

"Amman, help me," she huffed, hopping over a root and past a large oak tree. She knew not to wait. The village priest had always said that Amman only helped those who first helped themselves.

She ran for another ten minutes, before her legs were screaming too loud for her to ignore any further. Exhausted, she slowed down to a walk, and strained her ears to listen for the horses. She was surprised to find she heard nothing.

"Did I run fast enough to get away?" she asked. She listened again. Still nothing. Then she began to worry. She didn't need Roddin to tell her that there should always be some kind of sound in the middle of a forest. Birds singing, insects chirping, something. Except there wasn't. There was nothing.

She looked around, but she didn't see anything out of the ordinary. Just the trunks of tall trees, and the same lay of bushes and grass and rocks that spread across the entire forest floor. But where were the birds? And what had happened to the soldiers?

Eryn walked as slow as she could, on the lookout for anything that might be dangerous.

She wasn't looking in the right place.

She took a step, and heard a snap. A second later, her world became blurry as she felt her leg get pulled out from under her, and her body was dragged along the grass. Within moments, she was hanging upside down from the branch of a tree, three feet off the ground. The contents of her quiver spilled out to the grass below.

"No," she cried. She lifted her head to see the looped rope that had snared her ankle. She just needed to reach the knife, and she could cut her way free. She looked down, searching for it on the ground, and finding it right under her. She stretched her arm out, reaching for it, the tips of her fingers brushing against the hilt.

She wondered who had put this trap here, and what they would do to her once they found her. She wondered if the soldiers would discover her first, and thank Amman for their good fortune.

"If only I were an inch taller," she said. She was afraid to use her Curse, afraid it would lead them to her, but she didn't have a choice.

Calling on the power was easier said than done. She knew she had to be calm, and her mind had to be at ease; difficult when you were hanging upside down from a tree. She also knew she had to aim her hand at whatever she wanted to use her power on, and concentrate on what she wanted it to do. She had found that it helped a lot to say something when calling on the Curse, a word that had meaning to her in relation to the effect she wanted to create. For moving things closer, she liked to say 'tappis'.

She closed her eyes and took a deep breath, trying to calm herself. She told herself she had plenty of time to get the knife, that whoever had snared her wouldn't know she was caught right away, and that she still couldn't hear the sounds of the soldiers approaching.

It took a few minutes, but eventually she calmed enough that she was ready to try to use

her Curse. She held her left arm out towards the knife, and concentrated on the idea of it moving up into her hand. She felt the tingle begin behind her ears.

"Tappis," she said, not too loud so she wouldn't give herself away. The knife shifted slightly, but not enough. She had to try again.

She took another deep breath, and reached her arm out, concentrating.

"Tappis," she said again. The knife vibrated, and then rose up into her hand.

"Thank Amman," she said, blinking her eyes as she felt the tear begin to form on her lower eyelid. She didn't want the blood going up and covering her eye. She bent over and grabbed the rope so she could pull herself up. At that very same instant, it snapped off the branch, and she fell face-first to the ground.

"Mmmm.." Something rumbled behind her. A deep, frightening rumble.

Eryn was trying to decide whether to turn around, or run, when she saw that the rope was moving, slithering towards her like a snake. She stifled a scream, still afraid of attracting the soldiers, and scrambled to get to her feet.

She was too slow. The rope coiled around her, and held her tight.

"Mmmm.." The rumble came again, closer this time. Before she knew what was happening, she was being lifted into the air by a pair of massive grey hands. She only had a split-second glimpse of the thing that had captured her, but it was enough. She thought she had been afraid before.

All Eryn could see from her vantage point on top of the monster's shoulder was a huge upper torso that was hunched and crooked, a gigantic rear covered by pants that had been stitched together with the remains of other, smaller pants, and the backs of large grey feet, the skin of which was cracked and mottled like stone. She hadn't seen the thing's face, and she was

pretty sure she didn't want to.

Master Lewyn had always told stories about the monsters that lived in the woods. The goblins and ogres and trolls. She had always thought they were no more than tales meant to scare the young, and entertain the old. Now it turned out maybe the stories were true?

The thing didn't carry her far, and she could tell by the large tracks it left that it wasn't concerned with being followed. Before long it reached the hollowed out base of a large tree, under which had been dug out a tunnel that dove down into the earth. It carried her down the tunnel, and dumped her off in its lair.

"Mmmm..." The creature laid her on her stomach, and she felt a tug on the ropes. Then they fell away.

Eryn wasn't sure what to do. Was the monster letting her go? Or did he only want to eat her if she resisted? Should she be still, or try to run? She didn't waste a lot of time deciding. It was better to find out, and let Amman decide.

She planted her hands under her, and pushed herself to her feet, turning around in one smooth motion. She held her eyes closed waiting to be ripped apart, or growled at, or something. When none of those things happened, she opened her eyes.

"Mmmm..."

It was standing right in front of her. Ten feet tall, with a huge head and large, fanged teeth. Its ears hung from it like melted butter, and its nose was little more than a pair of holes in the center of its face. It had large black eyes, and thin, cracked lips. Its neck was as crooked and bent as its back.

Eryn thought about screaming, but she still didn't want the soldiers to find her. At least if this thing killed her, it would be doing so for food, not out of pure malice. Still, it didn't look like

it wanted to kill her and eat her. In fact, it looked sad.

"Mmmm," it said again, staring at her. "Mmmalik." It tapped on its chest. Was it telling her its name?

"Malik?" Eryn asked. She fought against the natural fear that came from standing before something that looked so menacing.

It took a deep breath in, and huffed it out. "Malik," it said.

"Hello, Malik. I'm Eryn." Her voice was shaky from nervousness, but she managed to steel herself enough to put out her hand. She hoped the creature could take it in its own massive fist without breaking it.

It didn't take her hand at all. It just stared at her for a minute.

"Hur...hurrrr....hurrrttss," Malik said, looking down at the ground. "Huuurrttss."

Eryn immediately forgot her fear. "What hurts?" she asked. "Did you hurt yourself?"

Malik still just looked at her, as if considering something. "Huuurrttss," it said again. It put a finger to its eye, and ran it down its face, like a falling tear.

Eryn remembered her bleeding eye. It always did that when she used her Curse. "No, it doesn't hurt." Did this creature really care if she was in pain?

"Huuurrttss," it said again. It held out its other hand and opened it. Resting in its palm was her knife. It looked like it belonged to a doll in its hand. "Taakkkee."

Eryn was confused. The monster was offering her the knife back? She moved slowly, stepping forward and reaching out. She was sure it would catch her hand in its own, or pull the weapon back at the last second, but it did neither of these things. It just let her take the knife.

"Thank you," Eryn said. She needed to leave. She needed to get back out into the woods and follow the creature's tracks back to where her things had fallen. She didn't want to lose the

round stone, or the red crystal brooch. She was sure she would need them to find the answers that she sought. "I have to go," she said to it. "I have to leave."

She looked around the small hole for the first time, and her fear began to overcome her again. All around the corners of the lair were bones. Large bones, small bones. Some were picked clean, others still had rotting flesh and muscle on them. In the corner was a larger pile of bones, spread out in a circle and covered with branches and leaves so that it looked like a bed. On top of the bed was a single book.

"Huurrtrtss," Malik said again. It took a tentative step towards her, so she backed way, closer to the bed.

"You have a book," Eryn said, taking back control of her fear. If it had wanted to hurt her, it would have done it already. Wouldn't it?

She had only seen one other book, the one her father had brought back from Elling City. She was curious why a monster would have a book. She wondered what it could be. "Do you mind if I look at it?"

She took a few more steps back to the bed, and leaned over to retrieve it. It was a plain item, with a simple leather cover and a number of pages inside. Malik hadn't moved, so she opened it up and began flipping through it.

There was writing, so much writing, but no pictures. She turned page after page, seeing the words but not wanting to take the time to read them. She needed to get out of there, to get her things and get out of the forest. She needed to go to Elling and learn what she could about *him*. Why was she wasting time with a book?

"Pleeeeeeeasse," Malik said. He was still standing there, his head hung low. "Huurrtrtss."

Eryn realized then that the monster wasn't asking her if she was hurt. It was telling her

that it was hurt. She looked at it more closely, noticing how its eyes followed her head as she examined it for injury. "I don't see anything."

"Mmmm..." It closed its eyes and started shaking. Eryn saw the tears began to pool on its cracked, grey face.

She didn't know what to do. It was clear the thing was in pain, enough that it was making it cry. She looked back at the book, at the headings on each of the pages. She realized then that she was holding a journal.

"Is this yours?" she asked. Malik didn't respond. "How can this be yours? Your hands are too big to hold a quill." Still, she thought maybe there could be something useful in the book. She wasn't the best reader, but it didn't hurt to check.

She turned to the last entry, only about halfway through the book. It was written in sloppy hand, with big loops and splotches that made it more difficult to read. It also made Eryn believe that it had been written either at the same time, or after Malik had been injured.

Year Of Our Lord: 423

I fear this is the last entry I will be able to make in this journal. The change is occurring more rapidly now, and I can tell that both my body and my mind are becoming too inhuman to continue writing. I look back on the decisions I've made that led me here, and I wish to Amman that I had been more wise. I assumed that I was the one who knew better, and I have found the hard way that I was wrong. All of the rumors I had heard are true, and the pain and torment that I suffer with every day is becoming more and more unbearable. I wish I had the strength to take my own life, but I am too much a coward. I will continue to suffer, becoming a creature of no

regard and with little memory of who I was before or am today.

There is a reason they call it a curse.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Silas

Silas stayed at Madam Toll's for two days. As promised, he was given a bed to sleep in, a warm bath, and a fresh pair of clothes - a blue tunic, brown trousers, knee high doeskin boots, and a sword belt.

The sword Rappett left him with looked like it had been taken from a graveyard; the hilt had bits of rust on it, and the edge was chipped and worn. Even so, when he swung it into the corner of his bedpost, it dug in enough to kill. The thief had also gifted him with a faded black cloak that he claimed used to be his own, before had had given up active jobs and began organizing. It was a few inches too short, but it was enough to keep his face shrouded in shadow if needed.

"Silas, honey, it's time to go," Evelyn said, knocking on his door. He had gotten over his first reaction to the prostitute after she had promised she wouldn't try to sell him on anything, and would keep her hands to herself. It turned out the woman held valuable wisdom based on her experiences, especially when it came to the movements of *his* soldiers through Root. 'If they don't fall asleep after, they talk,' she had said with a laugh. They had become fast friends.

Silas cinched the sword belt tight, slid the sword into the leather loop, and opened the door. As usual, Evelyn was wearing just enough of something to entice a man to want to see her take it off, but give them enough of an idea of what she had to offer that they would request her in the first place. Silas barely noticed, his mind set on his escape, and his heart somewhere across

the sea.

"I don't even know if she's alive, whoever she is," he muttered to himself.

"What's that, honey?" Evelyn asked.

Silas put up his hand. "Nothing. Just talking to myself."

"You do that a lot," she replied. "Better be careful, people'll start talking." She let out her throaty laugh and leaned in to kiss his cheek. "I'm going to miss having you around. I don't get to talk to many men who don't want to have a roll first."

Silas put his hand to her cheek, touching it gently. He looked her in the eyes. "Thank you. For your ear, and for your insight."

It had been his conversations with her that had made him decide to head to Elling City. For one, the greater population would make it easy for him to disappear. For another, it was the seat of the Overlord, and so there was always ripe information to be had on the movements of *his* empire.

"Take care of yourself, Silas," she said, as he walked past her and down the stairs. He passed through the kitchen to the orange door, and pulled it open.

Rappett was waiting for him. "Silas." He handed him a small leather pouch. "Trevon got me nearly double for the sword. I thought I would share the wealth, to entice you to come back to me if you come across another. I have a feeling you will."

He hated to admit it, but Silas had a feeling he would also. His intention was to learn what he could about *him*, and then move to put an end to the cruelty of *his* reign. If that meant killing their ruler, so be it. It was as much as *he* deserved, for all of the lives *he* had ordered taken.

He heard it in his head again.

Murderer.

"All the lives I have taken for *him*," he said softly.

Rappett didn't seem to hear, he just started walking through the tunnels. "We'll meet up with a man named Barstow on Cistern. He's got a load of grain he's transporting up to Elling. As long as you don't mind spending most of the next night in a burlap sack, you should be able to make it out of Root without drawing attention."

A few minutes later, they were standing in Rappett's shop, with the thief staring out through a crack in the door while wiping his brow with a handkerchief.

"I feel like those ladders add another rung every week," he whispered. "There's Barstow now. When he gives the signal, make a run for the cart. Jump in the back, find the sack, and get in it. He's going to have to tie it off, and then cover you with a few bags of grain. It's going to be hot, heavy, and hard to breathe." He turned back, his face serious. "There's no guarantee you'll survive."

Silas understood. "There's a guarantee I won't survive long if I stay in Root. I'll take my chances."

"I knew you would. I just thought I'd warn you. There's the signal now. Go!"

Rappett pushed the door open, and Silas took off towards the cart at a run. He saw Barstow waiting at the back corner, a large man with long black hair in a white shirt, dark pants, and a leather apron. He waved Silas on as he approached.

Silas leaped into the back of the cart and found the burlap sack, hopping into it and then laying on the floor of the wagon, curling himself up so he could get all the way inside. As soon as his head was covered, he felt Barstow's hands on the sack, wrapping the top and tying it off with a rope. Silas took a deep breath and tried to stay calm. He was at the mercy of the merchant.

"Just stay as still as you can, Morningstar," Barstow said. "I'm going to toss a few bags on you so the guards at the gate don't get suspicious. Once we're out of sight, I'll get them off and open the sack."

Silas didn't respond. A second later, he nearly lost his breath when the first bag came down on his chest. A second landed on his legs, and a third was placed just next to his head. The burlap was pushed down into his face, and he fought to control his nerves. It was as Rappett had warned, and even he wasn't sure he would survive.

"Here we go," Barstow said.

He felt the wagon rock when the man climbed up into the front, and heard him call to his horse. The cart began rolling forward, slow at first, and then at a steady trot.

Nothing would have been fast enough for Silas. He could feel the sweat forming on his face, his neck, his chest, and his legs. He could breathe, but it was shallow and labored, and he was sure he wasn't getting enough air to sustain himself indefinitely. They needed to go faster!

Silas was feeling lightheaded when the wagon rolled to a stop, and he heard the clinking of *his* soldier's armor.

"All carts require inspection, until the murderer is found," one of them said.

"Be my guest," Barstow replied. "I hope you catch the bastard what killed the soldiers and disfigured the good Constable."

He could almost feel them circling the wagon, checking underneath, looking over at the sacks of grain. At least they didn't climb aboard to move any of them.

"More than disfigured him," the soldier said. "Just as much signed his death warrant. You're free to go."

Silas didn't dare react, but he was still surprised that Penticott hadn't been lying about his

predicament. Again he wondered how he had managed to escape *him* intact.

"Thank you sir," Barstow replied. "A fine evening to you." He called to his horse again, and they were back on the move.

Still, Silas was beginning to panic. Breathing was getting harder, and his lightheadedness had turned to dizziness. His heart was beating way too quickly, and his mouth felt dry while his body felt wet. He clenched his eyes closed and tried to hold every muscle, to keep himself from moving until they were well enough away. He wanted to cry out, to claw at the sack, to try to push away the grain that was covering him.

He didn't. He held himself in check, and waited it out, each passing second like a lifetime of agony.

Then the wagon stopped. The wagon rocked when Barstow hopped off, and then Silas felt the pressure of the grain coming off him. He figured if they'd stopped, he was safe, and so he let himself cough, gulping in the air and choking on it.

"Okay, okay," Barstow whispered. "Try to quiet down. We may be out of sight but sound travels out here."

Silas held his breath again, letting his lungs burn instead of coughing. When the sack opened, he shoved himself out and took a deep breath of the fresh, cool night air.

"I never want to do that again," he said.

Barstow laughed. "It ain't pretty, but it works. Now get off my wagon, I've got grain to deliver."

Silas pulled himself the rest of the way out of the sack and hopped down from the cart. His legs were a little shaky under him, and he used the sword as a cane to hold himself up.

"Thank you, kind sir," he said, bowing as best as his body would allow.

"Take care of yourself Morningstar," Barstow replied. "Just because you're out of Root doesn't mean you aren't a wanted man. Be glad Rappett pays better than the new Constable." He laughed again, smacked Silas on the shoulder, and climbed back aboard his cart. He didn't look back as he rode away.

Silas stood on the side of the road and looked around. He knew he was about a half hour's walk from the Root gate; not near far enough to be safe from soldiers or passerby who might recognize him. He was on the road to Elling, and the Baden wasn't far. In fact, he was near where he had gone swimming, and ruined his life.

"Ruined?" he asked himself. "Or saved?"

He didn't remember much, but he could piece enough together to know that at one time he was as much of a monster as the rest of *his* army. It was bad enough that he had aided in the capture of the Cursed. It was worse that he had ordered the deaths of more people than he could count, and that there had been a time when he had considered it only collateral damage.

Murderer.

The voice was in his head again. He tried to drive it out by thinking about his next steps. Get to Elling, learn as much as he could, try to remember who he was, stop *him* from killing any more innocents. He knew it wouldn't be that easy, but it was a start.

Murderer.

It was a different voice this time. A woman's voice. He closed his eyes, and his mind carried him back to the shore, watching the large ship set sail for the unknown lands on the other side of the sea.

"I didn't know," he said.

"What did you think would happen?" the voice asked. "Your own son. How could you?"

"It shouldn't have been that way. It was supposed to be impossible." Silas stumbled forward along the side of the road, his eyes still closed, his head somewhere else.

"Amman knows your heart. He saw how cold and hard it had become. How you saw nothing but loyalty and duty to a tyrant. He wanted to teach you a lesson."

A lesson? He remembered. A lesson in loss, and grief, and guilt. A lesson in pain and suffering worse than anything he had endured as a soldier. A lesson he wanted only to forget, and had forgotten until he had run out of coin and been locked away.

Murderer.

His son had been Cursed.

Murderer.

He had found out.

Murderer.

He had ordered his death.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Eryn

Eryn read the last line of the journal again and again, her heart beating faster with each repetition. It couldn't mean her curse. Could it?

She dropped the book and looked at Malik, standing in front of her with tears in its eyes, its expression pleading.

"Pllleeeeeeasssee," it said again. "Huuuurrrttss."

"I don't know what you want," Eryn shouted. The book had made her afraid, more afraid than even *his* soldiers.

Malik jerked his head back at the noise, and started sobbing louder. "Pllleeeeeeasssee."

"By Amman, say something else!" She picked up the book and threw it at him. It bounced off his chest and fell to the floor, open to the final entry.

The monster looked down at it. A tear fell from its eye, landing below the writing. His hand moved out and pointed at the knife. "Killlllll," it said, the sound a flood of sorrow.

"Killlllll."

She opened her eyes wide. It wanted her to kill it! She looked at the knife. She had killed *his* soldiers, and she had killed Master Lewyn, but they had been trying to harm her. This monster, this... thing that used to be a person, it hadn't tried to hurt her.

She did the only thing she could think to do.

She ran.

Malik's head turned to follow her past, and then she was scrambling up the slope of dirt that led down into its lair and out into the forest. She looked down as she went, following his large footprints back to where she had lost her things. She would stop to pick them up, and then she would run, as fast and as far as she could. She knew so little about the world outside of her village, and all she had seen so far had been pain and sadness. What kind of world did she live in?

She looked back while she ran, expecting Malik to burst out of its hole and chase her down, to catch her and crush her in those massive grey hands, angry for refusing its request. She decided that if it did catch her, she still wouldn't kill it, assuming the knife could even get through that tough skin. It was one thing to kill an enemy, it was another to kill an innocent.

Eryn knew they hadn't gone far, and she reached her things with plenty of strength remaining in her lungs and legs. She slid the final few feet on her knees, grabbing the stone and the brooch and the arrows from the ground and shoving them back into the quiver. She looked back one last time, didn't see Malik, and hopped to her feet.

"Hold," came a shout from the edge of her vision. She turned her head, and saw a soldier moving out from behind a tree, his bow trained on her.

"Do not move," another voice said. A second soldier stepped into view. Then a third, and a fourth.

Had they been waiting for her? She had been foolish to run right to her things without even listening for them.

"If you're going to kill me, just kill me," she said. She knew she would rather die than be taken captive.

A fifth soldier stepped into view. He was different than the others, with short gray hair

and a scar across one of his eyes. He wore a thick black leather jerkin with a dark breastplate over it. The center of the plate was painted with the bleeding eye.

"I'm afraid we won't be able to honor that request at the moment," he said. "Not without a Mediator present, at least." He walked towards her, stopping a few feet away. "And it seems you killed the Mediator sent to retrieve you. It's been some time since something like that happened."

"I'm not scared of you," Eryn said. She was lying. She was scared. She wished she wasn't, because if she could relax she could call on her Curse to try to do... she didn't know what. Somehow she had stopped the Mediator, Lia, and the two soldiers that had been with her. She just needed to be able to do that again.

"Someone strong like you. I don't imagine you would be. We found the body of... What was his name, again? Lewyn? Back at our rendezvous point." He knelt down, his head winding up below hers, but she still felt like she was being talked down to. "To be honest, my dear, *I'm* afraid of *you*."

She knew he was mocking her. She tried to kick him in the face.

Faster than she could see, his hands came up and caught her foot, turning it and throwing her to the ground. She expected him to be on her with his sword, but he only laughed.

"You're a quick one, for sure," he said. "Roland, Gerrett, bind her and let's get out of here."

The two soldiers who didn't have their bows aimed at her started forward. One of them had a coil of rope hanging from his hip.

Eryn flipped back over and brought herself to her feet, holding her knife out for protection. "I'll kill you," she shouted at them.

The man with the gray hair only laughed again. "With that little thing?" he asked.

She was still thinking of how to respond when a rock hit the man in the side of the head, and he fell to the ground.

"Ambush," the soldier, Roland yelled, seeing his commander fall. The other soldiers forgot about her, turning around and scanning the forest, looking for their attacker.

Eryn looked around too. She hadn't seen anyone throw the rock. Finding no one, she slowly walked over to where the soldier was laying, and put her hand on the hilt of his sword. She had never used a real one before, only the sticks she and Roddin had pretended were swords. The soldiers didn't even notice.

She heard branches moving above them, and she turned just in time to see a massive gray shape come down on Gerrett, a huge fist punching him in the head and sending him flailing to the ground. Malik! Then she heard the whistle of arrows, and it roared at the injury.

She stopped being cautious, taking a firmer grip and pulling the blade all the way out of its scabbard. It had the same smoothness and lustrousness as Lia's staff, and it felt lighter in her hand than any of the swords her father had ever sharpened at the forge.

Malik had moved on from Gerrett, loping towards Roland, four arrows sticking out of his stomach and chest. She could see the blood running down around them, his life force leaking away. Had he come to help her, or had he come to get himself killed?

She didn't know, and she supposed it didn't matter. The soldiers weren't paying any attention to her, so she started backing away, keeping an eye on them to make sure no arrows came her way, but otherwise trying to retreat. Malik had reached Roland now, and he leaped onto him and pummeled him into the dirt, fists pounding the man in the face over and over. As it punched, it looked over at her. It knew she was there.

"Hellllppppp uuussssss," he moaned. Two more arrows blossomed from his body.

Eryn had enough. She turned and ran, trying to block out the screams of the soldiers and the howling of Malik from her mind.

She didn't know how long she ran for, but by the time she slowed her lungs, throat, and mouth were all on fire. She found a large tree and kneeled behind it, coughing and hacking, and finally dry-heaving. Master Lewyn had said there was a river, the Baden, and a road. She had been headed in the right direction. She couldn't be far.

She was just so tired. Her whole body ached like it had the first time she had gone to the forge, after her father had her carrying ingots and pumping the bellows all day. She didn't think she had the energy to go any further, not yet. She lifted her head up and listened. She heard birds chirping and flying around through the trees, and she took a deep breath. She could relax for a few minutes, and then she would find the river.

Eryn woke quickly, her eyes popping open and scanning the forest around her while her heart thudded against her chest. She had only planned to sit for a minute, and now that minute must have turned to hours. Looking up, the burnt orange of the sky told her the sun was beginning to set. And she was still so thirsty!

No soldiers at least, she thought, trying to calm her nerves. She got to her feet and held the sword she had stolen up to her face. She couldn't believe how light it was, more like a wood toy than a real, metal sword. "It's no metal I've ever worked with."

She cut the air a few times with it, listening to the sound it made. It was more hollow than she expected. Still, she was sure if it belonged to the lead soldier, it had to be of high quality. She

gave it one last look, and then started walking, heading east towards the river. *I need to find it soon, or I'll die of thirst.*

Two more hours passed, and the sky went from orange to black, lit only by the thousands of points of light floating within. The Whistling Wood was even darker, the thick treetops blotting out much of the light. Eryn knew she couldn't stop though, not until she had reached the river and taken a drink.

She stumbled through branches, tripped on roots, and pressed herself tight against trees whenever she didn't hear birds or insects, or whenever the bushes would shift from some loud animal or another passing by. She tried to keep an eye out for any fruits berries she could eat, but it was near impossible in the darkness.

She wanted to go home.

The thought brought her back to her family, and she cried once more, missing them. It also reminded her of Malik and his journal. The last entry had shown he had once had a family too. She was sure he had missed them, just as she was sure he had succeeded in ending his life by attacking the soldiers. She only hoped he hadn't lingered long. Was that to be her fate, and the fate of all Cursed? How could it be, when Lia had been Cursed, and there had been nothing wrong with her? She would find out when she reached the city.

Eryn was so wrapped up in her thoughts that she almost didn't notice when the trees parted and a wide, dirt road appeared, stretching a dozen feet across her path. Only after she had taken her first steps out onto it did she turn her head to both sides, praying to Amman that she hadn't walked right into the view of any soldiers.

"Thank you, Amman," she said, finding herself alone. She could hear the sound of water flowing over rocks close by. She ran across the road and into the thin outcropping of trees on the

other side, and then to the grassy bank of the river. She knelt down, put the sword next to her, and took another long drink, crying soundlessly.

"I've made it this far, Mother," she whispered. "I promise I will survive."

After she had her fill of the water, she got back to her feet and turned north. She was still so hungry, but she could survive a bit longer without food. Now that she'd found the river, and the road, she was anxious to reach her destination.

She walked for two more hours, following along the river, halfway between the water and the road, afraid of being seen too close to either. She was trying to decide whether it was better to travel at night or during the day, when she heard the first whisper.

"I'm telling you Magret, I hear something."

It was a man's voice. She glanced around, but it was too dark to see anybody.

"And I'm telling you, Tanner, you're imagin-"

A woman. She stopped speaking mid-sentence when Eryn stepped on a branch.

"Did you hear it?" Tanner asked.

"I think I did hear something," Magret replied.

Eryn stayed quiet and didn't move. She held the sword up in front of her, in case she was attacked.

"I don't hear anything now," Tanner said after a few minutes had passed. "It must have been a squirrel or something."

"Squirrels don't skulk around at night," Magret replied.

Eryn made up her mind. These people definitely weren't soldiers. "Hello?" she called, her voice still soft.

"Did you hear someone say 'hello'?" Tanner asked.

"I heard something. It sounded like hello, but what if it's a spirit. Or a ghoul. I've heard ghouls can talk like people, to trick them into coming closer."

"Hello," Eryn repeated, a little bit louder. "I'm not a ghoul. My name is Eryn."

Silence.

"What do you think Tanner?" Magret asked. "A ghoul would say it's not a ghoul if it was a ghoul to get us to come closer."

"It doesn't sound like a ghoul," Tanner replied. "It sounds like a girl."

"My name is Eryn," she repeated. She started walking in the direction of the voices. "I am a girl, not a ghoul. I need help. Food. I have coin."

She heard the sound of flint striking, and then saw a small flame through a bush up ahead. A moment later the flame was put onto the wick of a lantern, which illuminated the space enough for her to see Tanner and Magret sitting on the ground and a hand cart behind them, the contents covered by a blanket. It also allowed them to see her.

"It *is* a girl," Magret said, her eyes lifting. She was an older woman, thin, with long grey hair and a weathered face. She was wearing a simple cotton dress cinched around her waist by a rope.

"I told you it wasn't a ghoul," Tanner said. He was small and heavy, with a big nose and not much hair. His clothes looked like they had once been quite fine, but age and use had taken their toll.

They both smiled, until they noticed she was holding a sword, and had it pointed at them.

"Please," Magret said. "Leave us be. We don't have anything of value. We're simple merchants of fine found merchandise."

"Magret," Tanner said. "She said she's hungry." He started getting to his feet. "I have

some bread in the cart. Just take it and go."

Eryn was confused, until she realized she was still holding the sword out. She lowered the blade to the ground. "Wait," she said. "I'm sorry. I'm not here to rob you. Please. If you have bread, I can pay you for it." She reached behind her to get her quiver.

Tanner stopped moving towards their cart. "You aren't a bandit?" he asked.

"Do I look like a bandit?" Eryn replied, pushing past the bush so she was only a few feet away.

"Come to think of it... no. How much can you give me for a loaf of bread?"

Magret leaned over and smacked him on the arm. "Where are your manners, Tanner? You're going to make a child pay for bread?" She swept out her hand. "Come, child, sit with us and rest a while. My name is Magret, and that's my husband Tanner."

Eryn smiled and sat down across from her. "I'm Eryn," she said.

Tanner retrieved the bread from the cart and handed it over. Eryn tore a piece off and shoved it into her mouth.

"Thank you," she said once she had swallowed. "I haven't eaten all day." She tore off another piece.

"Eryn," Tanner said. "I don't mean to pry, but you look a wee bit young to be traveling alone, especially armed with a blade like that. That there is a soldier's sword."

She looked at him, her heart starting to pound again. She wasn't sure what to tell them.

"My family," she said at last. "My family is dead. *His* soldiers killed them. My brother, he... he was Cursed. They tried to hide him. My father, he was a blacksmith. He sent me to the forge to get the soldier's sword. He thought that was why they had come. He didn't know how they knew. Nobody was supposed to know."

She watched them as she spoke, trying to tell whether or not they could guess she was lying. They seemed to believe her story. It didn't hurt that even her re-telling was making her teary.

"By the time I came back, they were dead and my brother was gone. They took him away or killed him too. I was scared they would come back for me, so I ran away. I have family in Elling, so I was going there."

Tanner and Magret looked over at one another, and then at her. Eryn held her breath while she waited to see how they would react.

"I see," Tanner said, his tone more serious. "So, I don't think your brother would be the girl with short brown hair the soldiers are riding up and down the Elling Road looking for?"

Eryn's breath caught in her throat. She had been so stupid. Of course the soldiers would have passed by these two merchants, and asked them if they had seen her. She rose to her feet, and lifted her sword again.

"I don't want any trouble," she said. "I just want to get to Elling City. I made a promise."

Magret looked like she was going to cry. "Just wait a second," she said. "Please." She and Tanner met eyes again, for just a moment.

"We had a child once," Tanner said. "A long time ago. He-"

"No," Eryn said. She had heard this story already from Master Lewyn. "Don't lie to me. Don't try to trick me so you can hand me over to *his* soldiers when it's convenient for you." She pointed the sword at Tanner. "If you have another loaf of bread, I'll pay you for it. Otherwise, I'll be on my way. Thank you for your food."

She bent down and reached into the quiver, searching for her coin. She wasn't going to steal.

"Eryn, wait," Tanner said. "We want to help you. We know you're Cursed. Our son was Cursed. They killed him."

"Killed him, and let you live?" she asked. "I doubt that." She found the silver coin at the bottom of the quiver and held it out to them.

"It's true," Magret said. "We're no friends of *his*. Why do you think we're hiding on the side of the road? There's no telling what lengths they will go to in order to get what they want, especially at night. When a Cursed is on the run, nobody is safe."

She wanted to believe them. She wanted to trust them. She would have, except she had trusted Master Lewyn, the man she had known her entire life, and he had nearly gotten her killed. "No," she said again. "I'll get the bread myself."

She walked around them, keeping them away with the point of the sword. She tossed the coin to Tanner. "This should cover it."

"Eryn," Tanner said. "It's far too much for a bit of bread."

"It's too little when you're hungry and have no food," she replied. She reached the wagon and put her hand to the blanket covering their supplies. She noticed how worried the two merchants suddenly looked.

"Eryn, wait," Magret pleaded.

She lifted the blanket and looked inside.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Eryn

The shock nearly made her fall to her knees. The cart was filled with things she recognized. Tools from her father's forge, clothes from Laia's shop, a sack of grain from the Dunn's farm. Even the blanket had belonged to someone in her village, she realized.

"Eryn, I'm sorry," Tanner said. She could tell he was moving towards her. She spun around on her knees and lashed out with the sword, not caring if she struck him or not. He fell backwards to avoid it.

"What did you do?" she asked, her eyes filling with tears again, her anger building.

"Eryn, wait. We can explain," Magret said. "We aren't bad people."

"What did you do?" she repeated, her voice louder.

"Please, Eryn," Tanner said. "You'll bring the soldiers down on us."

If he hadn't said that, she might have exploded, screaming at them in anger. She remembered when she had yelled at Roddin, and slapped him, how it had brought Lia right to them. She wasn't going to do that again.

"I don't understand," she whispered, distraught at the sight.

"They killed them," Tanner said. "Your village. They killed all of them. Last night."

"But, Master Lewyn-

"Your woodsman? They would have killed him too, once they had you. I bet they sent him out looking for you before they did it. Magret and I, we follow the soldiers leaving from

Root, that's the town between here and Elling City. We wait to see if they come back with the Cursed in chains, or in a sack, or not at all. Then we go in and collect whatever we find that we know we can sell. It isn't a glamorous life, or even much of an honorable one, but it beats going hungry."

She could hardly believe it was true. "How can you live like that?" she asked. "How many villages do they destroy?"

"Too many," Magret replied. "Elling is only one of the thirty provinces in *his* empire. It used to be that we would visit one village each year, and collect just enough to get by. Yours is the fourth village that has been put to the torch this year. As near as we can tell, the number of Cursed is growing."

"As is the number of people trying to hide them," Tanner added.

"If you only need one village to live, then why? Why scavenge from the innocent dead if you have enough to eat?"

"We take these things and sell them, and then we pass the coin on to the resistance," Magret said.

"Resistance?" Eryn asked.

Tanner nodded. "Each province has an Overlord, and each Overlord has a number of Lords, depending on the size of the province. The Lords are usually in charge of a town or two and whatever villages fall in their jurisdiction. Some of the Lords are sympathetic to those who have lost their children, their families, and in some cases their whole village to *his* soldiers. They have been helping to organize an army to rise up against *him*. There have already been a couple of skirmishes in Aspin; that's another of the provinces."

Eryn was amazed. If there was a resistance, she wanted to be part of it. "How do I join

them?"

"I'm sorry, Eryn," Magret said. "They won't allow the Cursed to fight. If you seek them out, they'll do what they can to give you shelter and try to protect you, but that will be the end of it."

"They won't let me fight?" Eryn asked.

"No. They can't get in the way of *his* edict on the Cursed, if they do the whole force of *his* armies will come to bear against them before they can gather enough resources to fight back. They will try to help you hide, but they will not let you participate."

Eryn shook her head. That wasn't good enough. She wasn't going to hide somewhere while other people died trying to keep her safe. She had sworn she would end *his* reign.

"Eryn," Magret said. "We can help you get to them. You don't have to run. You can try to go on with your life."

"Go on with my life? Everyone I loved is gone. Everything I knew is either gone, or in your cart. Take it, sell it, help the resistance, that is well and good. If you want to help me directly, get me to Elling City."

The married couple looked at one another again, and then back at her.

"We can help you to the north side of Root," Tanner said, "but it will be suspicious if we bypass the town completely, and Rappett will be waiting for us. You'll have to make it the rest of the way to Elling on your own."

"How are we going to get past the soldiers?" Eryn asked.

"Don't worry, child," Magret said. "I have an idea."

She stood up and joined Eryn by the cart, pulling back the blanket and pushing aside a few of the things. Resting at the very bottom was a scissor.

"They're looking for a girl with short brown hair," Marget said. "Not a boy with a shaved head. You're tall for your age, I think we have some clothes in here that will fit you."

Eryn reached up and stroked her hair. She wasn't thrilled with the idea of cutting it off, or pretending to be a boy, but she was willing to do whatever she had to. It seemed fitting that she would be wearing one of the villager's clothes to evade the soldiers.

"I have a razor you can use to finish the shave," Tanner said.

They sat her down and Tanner held the lantern to her head while Marget cut her hair and then used the razor to remove the stubble. It felt weird to Eryn to be bald, and to feel every prick of the wind on her scalp. She ran her hand over it, back and forth in disbelief. Then Marget rooted around in the cart again until she found a brown tunic and pants.

"They're a little big, but it will help hide your breasts," she said.

Eryn took the clothes and walked into the darkness, quickly changing and returning.

"Well?"

"Perfect," Tanner said.

"Get some sleep, Eryn," Marget said. "We'll be leaving at first light. I have to warn you though, if any of the soldiers who came to your village stop us, you may have to run. They'll know it was just the two of us."

"I don't want to put you in danger," Eryn said. "Maybe I should just go ahead on my own."

"Nonsense. You'll stand out less with us, especially now, and the road will be a lot faster. Plus, we have plenty of bread, and we're not that far from Root as it is. You'll be on the north side in a couple of days at most."

"How can I ever repay you?"

Tanner and Marget's faces both turned grim.

"If your goal is to kill *him*, you can repay us by killing *him*," Tanner said, while Marget nodded her head.

They were on the east side of the town Tanner had said was called Root, on a smaller dirt road used mainly by farmers to bring their harvest to either the north or south side of town, when they were stopped by *his* soldiers.

It had been good fortune that Eryn had been pulling the hand cart at the time, having insisted on sharing their load, especially since she was younger and stronger than both of them. It made her appearance as a boy even more believable. They had thought ahead to put her bow, quiver and the sword she had taken at the bottom of the cart, covered by all of the other items the two had scavenged from her village.

"Hold," the voice shouted from behind them. The three turned as one while the two soldiers rode up on the backs of their large black chargers.

"Can I help you, My Lord?" Tanner asked, giving them a bow of subservience.

"We're in search of two fugitives," the soldier said.

Eryn tried to mask her surprise. *Two?*

"One is a young girl, with short brown hair, about the same height as your boy. Her name is Eryn Albion. The other is a tall, thin, older man with shoulder length white hair and blue eyes, goes by the name of Silas Morningstar."

Tanner and Marget looked at one another, and then at Eryn. She shrugged.

"We haven't been on the road more than a few days, My Lord," Marget said. "You're the first person we've seen who wasn't a merchant or a farmer."

The other soldier circled around the cart, looking down at it. "What do you have in the wagon?" he asked.

"Found merchandise," Tanner replied, pulling back a corner of the blanket. "We picked it up from a village to the east of here. Are you interested in buying anything?"

The soldier examined the uncovered items. "That garbage? No."

"You're free to go, merchant," the other one said. "Be sure to alert the guard if you happen across either of the fugitives. There is a substantial reward for information leading to their capture."

Eryn watched Tanner and Marget's faces, holding her breath and waiting to see if she had misplaced her trust yet again.

"We will. Of course, My Lord," Tanner said. "If we see the girl, or the man with the long white hair."

The soldier nodded, and the two of them rode off together, north along the road.

"Thank you," Eryn said to them, once they were gone. "You could have turned me in and collected the reward."

Marget looked hurt by the statement. "It's hard to trust in this world, child. I understand that. Know that you can always trust Tanner and me."

Eryn knew the woman would never understand how much that simple statement meant to her. She smiled and took the handles of the cart, turning around and pulling with renewed strength.

"You be careful, child," Magret said, wrapping Eryn in a tight hug.

"I will," she replied, returning the hug. She fought against the tears that threatened to come. She had only known Magret and Tanner for two days, but in that time they had been like surrogate parents to her.

"We'll miss you," Tanner said. He was holding her quiver in one hand, and the sword in the other. She saw he had placed it into a simple leather scabbard. "It was in the bottom of the cart. I thought it would come in handy, so the soldiers wouldn't see the blade. The way it shines, it's bound to draw too much attention to you."

She smiled and threw her arms around him. "Thank you, Tanner."

He dropped the quiver to return her hug, and then handed it to her when she broke the embrace. Eryn slipped it over her shoulder, and took the sword, unbuckling her belt so she could slide the scabbard on. Then she took her bow from them.

"You look like a woodsman's apprentice," Tanner said. "Or a mercenary."

Eryn couldn't help but think about Roddin. She hoped Amman was taking good care of him and her parents, and that they were pleased to see her this way.

"It will take you five or six days to reach Elling City on foot," Magret said.

"We put the rest of our bread in your quiver," Tanner added. "If you stay close to the Baden, you should have no shortage of water to drink."

Magret reached out and straightened her tunic. "Try to stay at the side of the road, and travel as much as you can under darkness, that will reduce the number of soldiers you run into. The ones who do pass by will probably stop you and ask where you're going with a sword and a

bow. Just tell them you're headed to Elling to audition for the Overlord."

"Audition?"

"Yes. There are many young men who want to join *his* army, but they only take the ones that have potential with the sword and bow. If you want to enlist, you must audition in front of an Overlord, a Lord, a General, or a Constable."

"Why would anyone want to join *his* army?"

Magret shook her head and sighed. "Not all families have been affected by the Curse. The ones that haven't, they don't always understand why what *he* is doing is so wrong. They haven't lost a child, or had a cousin or a brother sent to the ore mines as punishment. Besides, being a soldier can be a trying but comfortable life. They are fed, clothed, and housed by the Empire. They want for nothing, and they have more power than they ever would as a farmer, or all but the wealthiest merchants."

"I know so little about the Empire." Eryn said. "What are the ore mines?"

Tanner pointed to her sword. "They are great big caves in the side of mountains, where thousands of prisoners dig out the earth in search of the metals *his* smiths use to make all kinds of incredible things. That sword of yours is made of an alloy, that's a mixture of different metals, that comes from *his* mines."

"You mean this sword exists because of slaves?"

"Not slaves," Tanner said. "Prisoners." She didn't miss the sarcasm in his tone.

"What are their crimes?"

"We don't always know. Sometimes, it is for unknowingly aiding a Cursed. Sometimes it is for stealing bread. Sometimes, it is for nothing at all. I have heard that *his* soldiers will work with the Overseers of the mines to collect more prisoners when they have not delivered enough

ore to *him*."

Eryn couldn't believe it. Things were so simple in the village. Everyone worked together, to help one another survive as one big family. "What does *he* need it all for?"

"*He* doesn't need it all," Magret said, her voice full of venom. "Even if *he* did, *he* could pay people to work the mines, instead of having the soldiers take them." Her voice softened.

"You will learn what you need to when you get to Elling. Find your way to the Tenders district. It isn't the safest part of the city, but that is where the truth lives."

Eryn took a deep breath, and thought about her promise again. She was afraid of the city, and of being around so many people. Her entire life, she had known less than a hundred, and she knew from Tanner and Magret that Elling was much bigger than that.

"I hope I can survive there," she said.

Tanner smiled and rubbed her bald head. "You're a strong one. Smart and resilient. You'll do more than survive there."

She gave both of them another hug. "Thank you again, for everything."

"Good luck, Eryn," Magret said. "I hope we see you again one day."

"Me too," she replied.

She turned around, and started walking.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Silas

Silas heard the sound of a horse racing down the road. In the darkness of night, he couldn't make out the cloud of dirt that he knew would trail behind, but the sound was enough. He scrambled off the road at a run, sliding on his knees along the grass and coming to rest behind a tree.

"Lucky I was here, and not back there," he whispered. He had only gotten beyond the farmlands between Root and Elling a short time ago. It was a segment of the road that offered nowhere to hide.

The rider was a messenger, in light black cloth and riding a Portnis stallion, a larger but leaner horse from the province of the same name, located on the other side of the Killorn Mountains. Portnis stallions were famous for their speed and stamina, but also for their skittishness. They made excellent mounts for messengers, and terrible mounts for soldiers.

He flew by Silas' hiding spot, the expression on his face one of worry and excitement. Silas watched him until he vanished into the darkness, and then moved back out onto the road. He would walk for as long as his legs would allow, and then find a spot by the Baden where he could rest out of sight.

It hadn't been an easy thing to do. The road between Root and Elling was crowded with merchants, soldiers, nobles, and others, all headed to or from the capital. He had seen the soldiers stopping some of the merchants and talking to them. He had heard the whispers; that they were

searching for him, and a Cursed. A girl, who had somehow managed to escape the soldiers and the Mediator sent to retrieve her. He had smiled when he had heard that one.

The faded cloak had been an unexpected blessing. It had allowed him to blend in more easily, covering his long white hair and keeping his blue eyes shaded and less obvious. He tried to disappear in plain sight, walking with his head down, always listening, but never changing his posture or the direction of his head. At least not when there were others sharing the road with him, unless he was trading his coin for a meal. He had been tempted by ale more than once, but had fought the urge to forget, the incessant voice always whispering in his mind whenever his thoughts began to stray.

Murderer.

Otherwise, the soldiers and the other travelers paid him little mind. As far as they were concerned, he was just another old man in search of work in the city.

He had only been walking for a few more minutes, when he heard the sound of a horse, heading in the other direction.

"Not horse," he said. "Horses."

He ran off the road, but he didn't see anywhere to hide that he could reach in time. He dropped down, flattening himself against the grass and hoping they were in too much of a hurry to notice.

They were. Six horses rode by at a full gallop, the Portnis among them. The messenger, four soldiers, and a Mediator. Silas saw that the Mediator had someone on their horse with them. A girl with short brown hair.

They didn't notice him, their eyes fixed on the road. He noticed them. He rose up behind them, watching them leave. In his mind, he saw Calum Hess laying on the ground in the barn,

about to be taken by the flames.

"Remember," he had said.

The girl had been captured, not killed, which was a good sign. He knew they would be taking her to a collection point, before moving her on. That meant he had time to catch up.

Silas remembered passing by a group of minstrels who had made camp for the night, not that far back. They had possessed a covered wagon, a carriage, and six horses. He headed that way at a run.

"Be quiet Sena," Robar Quall said to his wife with a laugh. "I was not *that* drunk."

"You were too, Robar," she replied. She turned to the rest of the minstrels sitting around the small fire they had made. "So there he is, standing up in front of the Overlord, singing 'Your Merry Stones' at the top of his voice."

The others were laughing hard, their chirps and guffaws echoing into the night. They knew they had little to fear on the Elling road, especially right now, when the soldiers had increased their patrols in search of the killer and the Cursed.

"So what did he do?" Jeson asked between wheezing breaths and laughter.

"He..." Robar laughed. "He..." He laughed again. "He-"

"Excuse me." Silas stepped out of the darkness, and into the light of their fire, cutting off the musician before he could finish his tale. He had his hood up, and his sword drawn. He put their theatrics to shame, stepping into the flickering firelight and lowering the hood, allowing them to see his white hair and blue eyes reflecting the flames. "I need to borrow a horse."

All of the laughter stopped, the six minstrels falling dead silent. They looked at him with fear in their eyes, but didn't respond to his request.

"Hellppppp," Jeson shouted into the night. "Murderer!"

Silas was on him in a blink, leaping over the fire, grabbing the drunk bard from behind, and putting his hand over his mouth. He tried to shake off the pain and guilt that had blossomed in him at hearing the man call him that.

"Be quiet," he whispered. "A horse," he said to the rest of them. "I only need borrow it, and I will return it to you, if not on the road then in Elling."

"What if we just call for the soldiers again?" Sena asked. She had found a small knife somewhere, and she held it out in front of her.

"The soldiers are gone," Silas said. "Didn't you hear them ride off?"

"I think I did," Jeson said, the words coming out muffled through Silas' hand. "I think I did," he repeated when Silas released his mouth.

"Please," Silas said. "I don't want to harm any of you, but I have to take one of your horses."

"What for?" Robar asked.

"To chase after the soldiers," Silas replied.

Robar began laughing again. "You want to chase them? That is rich. Take the dapple at the front of the carriage. She's worth the story I can make out of this. If you live, come back and tell us what happened, and I'll even give you some coin."

"Robar!" Sena began to complain, but he put his hand up.

"Not now," he said. "Think about it, my dear. This is the work of Amman to bring us such inspiration."

She still didn't look happy, but she nodded. "I'll help you unhitch her."

Silas let go of Jeson and trailed behind Sena.

"These are crazy times," she said. "I've never seen so many Cursed being brought in from the countryside. It's like there's something in their water, or something."

"What do you mean?" Silas asked.

"We crossed over the Killorn Mountains from Portnis a couple of weeks ago, on the way to Elling. We passed at least four Mediators. I haven't seen four on the road between Elling and Portnis in all of the eight years we've been playing this route. In fact, I heard from some others that they're having a shortage. They've had to start sending soldiers out to get the Cursed without a Mediator present."

Silas wasn't sure what to think about that. He knew they'd had to send for Roque from Elling because Root's Mediator had been busy. Had that been the one riding with the Cursed girl he'd seen?

Sena brought him over to where the horses were grazing. She took the dappled mare's head in her arms and rubbed her muzzle. "This is Binney. She's the youngest and fastest we've got."

He looked the horse over. Youngest and fastest didn't mean young and fast, but she would have to do. "If I don't have a chance to return her to you here, I'll leave her at the stable closest to the south gate of the city. You can pick her up there."

"Be nice to her. She isn't a warhorse." Sena looked like she was going to cry.

"I'll keep her out of harms way." Silas put his hand over her neck and pulled himself up onto her bare back. He trotted her away from the rest of the group, and then ordered her into a full gallop.

The horse was faster than she looked, and Silas found himself well beyond the point where he had dropped to the grass in no time. He rode her hard, but not at a deadly pace, keeping an eye out for any sign of the soldiers, which was difficult to do in the darkness.

He didn't find them riding up the Elling road. Not directly. What he did find was a bit of trampled earth that led off through a small field and into a thick growth of trees. He would have missed it, but the dirt was newly thrown, moist and dark against the dry road it had landed on. There was no guarantee it had been the soldiers, but he didn't need to be a woodsman to guess that heavy chargers at a run would cause that kind of destruction.

"I guess you'll have to wait here, Binney," Silas said, sliding off the horse. He hoped she wouldn't roam too far with a nice field of grass for grazing on.

He entered the trees cautiously, his nicked and dull sword in hand. He kept his hood up and his cloak wrapped tight around him while he slinked from the cover of one tree to another. It was easy enough to follow so many horses, with all of the damage they caused to the surrounding brush. He tracked it from cover a few years away, mindful of every step. The movement was slow, but he soon reached his quarry.

He saw the fire first, belching out flame and smoke into the night air, cracking and spitting from the heat. He saw the soldiers next, three of them sitting around it, along with the messenger. He was still a bit distant, but they were easy to spot with their mail and helms. They were talking amongst themselves, loudly enough that he was sure they weren't concerned about anyone coming across their camp. Who would cross paths with *his* soldiers intentionally?

"Where are you?" Silas said, trying to use the light of the fire to locate the Mediators. He didn't see them. "I'm not close enough."

He ducked down, getting on his hands and knees and moving at a snail's pace through the

woods. Insects skittered away in front of his face, and he wound up sliding across one of the charger's offal, leaving him with the smell of manure climbing up to his nose. The progress was excruciatingly slow, but he knew if the Mediator saw him, he was as good as dead. He might have escaped from Roque, but he'd had help.

He circled the camp like that, locating the fourth soldier leaning against a tree not twenty feet away from him, keeping guard over the camp. Silas was tense the entire time it took him to slither past the man and continue his circuit, searching for the Mediator and the Cursed girl.

When he found them, he nearly wept. The soldiers he had gone around were only the guards, a tiny camp keeping watch for a much larger one. He lifted himself up over a fallen log, giving himself a clear view past a pair of canvas tents and into the center of the true outpost.

There were at least two dozen soldiers there, sitting around multiple fires, talking and laughing. Beyond them, he saw a much nicer tent of red and gold, where he assumed the Mediator he had seen ride by, and possibly more, were stationed. Next to the tent, he located the Cursed girl.

Except, she wasn't alone.

She, and at least six others were in the back of a large wagon, covered over the top by canvas, and enclosed completely in iron bars. She was standing at the bars, looking out at the soldiers, with tears in her eyes. The others with her were either standing or sitting, their heads bowed, their expressions that of total defeat.

He heard Calum Hess' voice in his head, begging him to remember his promise. He heard the other voice too, scorning him as a murderer. He knew he had to find some way to help them, but how? He wouldn't be able to get them out with the Mediator's tent right next to them. With seven Cursed, that could mean as many as seven Mediators. There was no way he would survive

that.

He decided the first thing he needed to do was get closer. He would fail before he could try anything if he couldn't get himself near the wagon unseen. He couldn't be sure how the Cursed would react to him, so he had to avoid them too.

It was even slower going, sliding along the ground, maneuvering himself around behind the Mediator's tent and to the other side. At one point, he saw the messenger appear, taking a few rabbits he had roasted at the smaller fire and bringing it in to them. He announced himself at the door of the tent, and waited for some signal before entering.

Silas stopped his crawling when he reached the trunk of an old oak tree, tucking himself down between the tree and its roots, and finding a vantage point where he could watch the motion of the camp from a relatively short distance. He allowed himself to take one deeper breath, and settled in. Somehow, he needed to get the Cursed away, by himself, without being seen or captured.

"I picked the wrong time to stop drinking."

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

Eryn

Eryn learned quickly, a girl pretending to be a boy, walking alone on the road to Elling. Keep your head down, your eyes pointed at the road. Merchants are safe to talk to, as long as they believe you may buy something. Never take your mind or your hands off of anything you value, and never, ever let them think you're weak.

In the first hours after she had left Tanner and Magret behind, Eryn had felt more sad and alone and out of place than she ever had in her life. She paused in the trees that dotted the road from time to time, kneeling down out of sight of passerby and sobbing quietly into her hands, each time terrified someone would hear, and know she wasn't a boy, and find soldiers to turn her in to. She wished she could stop herself, but in those first hours of being truly alone, and not immediately threatened, she found that she couldn't.

When the tears had dried up, she resolved herself to staying strong. She walked with her head up, her posture confident, until a soldier had stopped her while she walked, and asked her where she was headed.

"Elling City, My Lord," she had replied, trying to mimic the way Tanner had dealt with the soldiers. She fought to keep her voice pitched deeper than was natural. "I'm going to audition for the Overlord."

The soldier had laughed at that, and kicked her in the side as he rode away, knocking her down. "Good luck to you, boy," he had said.

Eryn had pulled herself up without complaint, but she let go of the strong posture, instead stooping with her eyes downcast. She was sure the soldier's metal boot would leave a large bruise, and every step soon became painful. A part of her wanted to cry at that, but she denied herself the luxury. If she was going to work against *him*, she had to become accustomed to being attacked, because they weren't going to just let her ride up to *his* castle, or wherever *he* lived, and put a knife in *his* heart.

She had been walking for three days when she had run out of bread. Her stomach gurgled and ached for something to eat, and she had to force herself to leave the side of the road and the safety of the nearby brush and river to locate a merchant who might sell her some food.

"Excuse me," she said, finding a dark-skinned man with a covered horse-drawn wagon. "Do you have an food to spare? I can pay."

She had already removed two copper coins from the purse she had taken from Master Lewyn, before she had approached the merchant. She had witnessed a man being robbed already, when he had fumbled with his purse in front of the wrong people.

The man was shorter than her, so he had to look up to make eye contact. "What fool boy travels with no food?" he asked.

"I... I had food," Eryn said, still not used to being called a boy. "I just didn't bring enough."

He laughed at that. "You don't even know how much you eat? I have some scraps from last night's meal. It's a simple stew, and it's cold now, but it will satisfy your hunger."

Eryn handed him the two coins, and he eyed them with a smile, taking them and holding up a finger for her to wait. He whistled to his horse, who stopped walking, and then he circled to the back of his wagon. He climbed up inside, and she heard him moving things around. A

moment later, he popped back out with a small bowl filled with a dark liquid.

"You can't keep the bowl, so you'll need to eat it here." He handed it to her.

Eryn put it to her nose. It smelled more like dirt than anything she could eat. "What's in it?"

"Roots, mainly. That's why it smells like manure. Don't let that fool you, it goes down easy."

Eryn wasn't so sure, but she put it to her lips and tilted the bowl. It smelled like garbage, and it tasted just as bad, but she knew it was the only meal she was going to get. She swallowed it, and prayed to Amman that she could keep it down.

"Merchant."

A man in a faded black cloak walked up behind her, nearly scaring her into dropping the bowl. How had he gotten so close without her hearing him? She turned to look, but his face was hidden by the hood.

"Do you have any more of that stew?" He held out a copper coin that was half the size of the kind she had given the man. The man took it and nodded, giving a quick glance over at her to see if she would complain about the disparity in cost. She didn't say anything, but stared at the man.

He was taller than most of the other people she had seen, except for the soldiers on their horses. Standing next to him, her head topped out below his shoulder, leaving her feeling like she was standing next to a giant.

"Is there something you want?" He didn't turn his head, and she was sure he couldn't see her with the hood of the cloak like that, but somehow he had known she was staring at him.

"No, My Lord," she replied. She didn't think he was a Lord, but she hoped the deference

would be enough to avoid confrontation.

He didn't say anything else to her, but she was sure she heard him chuckling. She forced down the rest of the stew, and put the bowl on the back of the wagon. She glanced at him one more time before she walked away. His eyes met hers, and she barely caught her shock at seeing they were blue.

She kept walking, wondering if she had seen what she thought she'd seen. A tall man, with blue eyes. She hadn't seen many people of any kind with blue eyes, so what was the possibility he was the killer the soldiers were looking for? If he was the killer, maybe he could help her in some way? She turned around and looked at his back while he drank the stew. She couldn't just go up to him and ask him if he was the man the soldiers were looking for. What if he wasn't? Then she would really look foolish, and she might give herself away. She decided she would wait near the river, behind a tree, and follow him for a while, until she could be sure one way or the other.

She didn't have to wait long. He appeared on the road a bit further down from where she was hiding. She let him get far enough ahead of her that she was sure he wouldn't know she was following, and then she too regained the road, walking behind him with her head down.

The man walked for hours, leaving Eryn's legs exhausted. She considered giving up on following him, but she had kept going for so long, he was bound to stop soon, and then she could rest. Except, he didn't. He just continued walking, without food or drink or rest, leaving her dry and tired and angry.

They reached a group of minstrels with a brightly colored wagon who had set up a camp on the side of the road for the evening, and she told herself she would give up the chase and try to buy more food from them. But first he passed them by, and then so did she. She knew she

shouldn't have, but she just couldn't force herself to give up the hunt.

Then she heard the horses. There were five of them coming at full gallop up the road from the south. She didn't think they would recognize her in the darkness, and at that speed, but she rushed off the road anyway, not wanting to be trampled. She hid behind a bush, and watched as another horse ran towards them from the north. All six came to a stop right in front of her. The rider of the lone horse reached into a bag on his saddle, and handed his letter to a Mediator. Not only that, but the Mediator had a girl with short brown hair in the saddle, positioned in front of them. Did they think that was her? Or was she another Cursed?

The Mediator took the letter, and opened it. She heard muffled voices as he spoke to the messenger and the soldiers, and they took off, continuing north along the road.

Eryn stood up and made her way back to the road. She didn't know what the meeting had been about, but she was glad they hadn't caught her. At the same time, she was bothered by the thought that they might have mistakenly taken the girl in her place.

She kept walking, hoping the soldiers didn't notice the man she was following, and also hoping he hadn't gotten too far ahead. If he hated the soldiers enough to kill them, maybe he would help her go after them and save their captive.

She barely found a hiding place in time when she heard the running footsteps coming straight towards her. She jumped over a thicket of bramble, the thorns putting tears in her pants and skin, and turned around. She saw the man running back the other direction. His hood was down, and she could see the white hair dancing with his movement. It was him, she was sure of it now. But, why was he running the other way? Was he trying to get away from the soldiers? Maybe he wasn't as brave as she'd thought.

Eryn decided not to try to get his attention. She couldn't trust him if he was running away.

She would just have to try to follow the horses, and see where they went herself. She wasn't sure what she could do, but she had to do something. Her parents would never have wanted her to let someone else be hurt in her place. She began to run.

Pounding hoofbeats forced her to dive to the ground yet again. She landed on her stomach and turned to see another horse go by, with the man on it. She caught her breath in surprise. *He wasn't running, he was finding a way to get there faster!*

She jumped to her feet and kept running after him. Her legs were exhausted, but she felt renewed by the idea of this man fighting to save the girl. She was desperate to get to him as soon as she could, to help him against *his* soldiers. She didn't really know how to handle a sword, but she could use a bow with decent skill.

The excitement wore off after she had run, then walked, then run again for over an hour. She wanted so much to be there when he confronted the soldiers, but her body just wasn't fit enough to keep going for that long. She was just about ready to fall to the ground in exhausted frustration, when first she saw the torn up dirt and the tracks leading off through a field and into the woods, and then she saw the horse the killer had been riding.

Eryn followed the trail, walking cautiously through the field, and stopping at the edge of the trees. She took her bow from her back, and pulled one of the arrows from her quiver. She entered ready to fire at anything that came towards her. She only hoped her aim would be true.

She stopped when she saw the fire, and the soldiers sitting around it. She was wondering where the others were when she saw the man without armor get up, take something from the ground behind the fire, and start carrying it away. She watched him for as long as the light of the flames allowed, and then she crouched down and followed after him.

When she saw the larger camp, and all of the soldiers in it sitting around fires, laying on

the ground sleeping, or standing and talking to one another, she felt afraid.

When she saw the wagon, with the girl and six other prisoners inside, trapped behind metal bars, she felt angry.

When she looked from them to the finery of the red and gold tent where she knew the Mediator must be, she was livid.

She closed her eyes and felt her heart beating faster, her anger only growing the more time she spent looking at the wagon through the trees. She wondered where the killer had gone. Had he seen it was hopeless, and left? Except, the horse had been in the field, and he hadn't gone back past her. Was he still there, somewhere?

Eryn knew she had to do something, but what could she do? She was just one young girl, who didn't know how to fight. All of the arrows in her quiver wouldn't be enough to kill even half of the soldiers.

What she did have, she realized, was her Curse. And the blue stone that she had seen Lia use to shoot lightning at Roddin.

As quiet as she could, she put the bow on the ground and slid the quiver off her shoulder. She put it down in front of her, and reached into its depths, searching for the stone. When she found it, it was cold to the touch. She took it in her hand and drew it out, looking down at it. It didn't seem special, but she had seen what the Mediator had done with it, and the Mediator was Cursed, like her.

Eryn took a few deep breaths, trying to calm her nerves. She was either going to make her Curse help her, or she was going to die. Either way, at least she would know she had done her best to save innocent people.

She stood up.

She took a few more breaths, slowing her heartbeat, calming herself, giving herself confidence and strength. She held the stone out in front of her in her palm, looking down at it and concentrating. She knew what she wanted it to do. She sent those thoughts towards it, and started walking forwards.

The tingle started behind her ears as she reached the edge of the trees, leading into the small clearing where the camp was arranged. In the back of her mind, she heard the soldier that saw her first screaming an alarm. In the corner of her eye, she saw them rush to grab their weapons; the swords and the bows. She felt the power building, the tingle slipping down her spine and between her shoulders, running like water through her hand to the small blue stone she was holding.

"Litsum," she said, pushing her thought at the stone.

The world exploded.

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

Silas

Silas watched the messenger exit the tent and start walking away. He glanced over at the prison wagon again, taking note of the heavy lock on the door, and the hitch at the front. It would be hard to break the lock with the lousy sword he was carrying, and even harder to get the key from whichever Mediator he was sure was holding it. The hitch was another story, though. If he could sneak in once most of the camp had gone to sleep, he might be able to get a couple of horses onto the wagon, and start rolling it away.

"At least until they hop on their horses and ride me down," he muttered to himself. He would be even more of a sitting duck steering the wagon, giving the soldiers plenty of chances to put an arrow in his chest.

He was reconsidering his plans when he noticed a faint blue light coming from the woods on the other side of the Mediator's tent. Before he could shift himself to get a better look, he saw that the light was coming from someone's hand. He followed the hand up to the arm to the shoulder, and then to the face. He recognized the boy from the silk merchant's cart immediately.

There was a shout as one of the soldiers saw the boy too.

"What in the name of Amman is he doing?" Silas asked himself. "He's going to get killed."

The blue light was growing brighter, and he saw how the boy was looking down at his hand. No, not at his hand, but something he was holding. Then he saw the blood that was pooling

below his left eye.

Silas didn't think, he just acted. He rose up from his hiding spot and drew his sword, running towards the boy. He was Cursed, and he was free! He wasn't sure what he was doing, but he was sure he was going to need help.

No sooner had he reached the clearing than the blue light exploded outward in a blinding white light, lances of it launching everywhere around them. Silas threw himself to the ground, narrowly avoiding one of the bursts, and hearing it hit the tree he had just been hiding behind, lighting it on fire. He heard screams, as some of the bolts lashed into soldiers, and cries of fear from those that weren't struck. More bolts launched from the boy's hand, hitting the trees around them, hitting the Mediator's tent, hitting more soldiers. In a matter of seconds the entire camp was turned to chaos.

Silas pulled himself up. He saw the boy suddenly react as though he was in pain, dropping whatever he had been holding to the ground. The lightning stopped immediately, and he stood there clutching his wrist and looking down at his hand, still smoldering from the heat of the display.

The Mediator's tent was on fire, and Silas saw the flap at the entrance get shoved aside, and a man with long brown hair tied back in a ponytail step out, sword in hand. His eyes went directly to the Cursed boy, and he started charging towards him, raising the weapon to strike.

The boy saw him coming, but didn't move, his eyes wide with fear. Silas started running for them, forcing himself to move as fast as he could. He reached the Mediator just as he was preparing to strike the boy, stabbing the dull point of his sword into the man's back and running him through. He reached up and took the man's hand, preventing him from bringing the sword down on the boy, and then threw him to the ground. He dropped his dull blade, and claimed the

Mediator's.

The boy was looking at him, his mouth wide open, his eyes wild. Then he raised a finger and pointed.

Silas spun around, bringing up the Mediator's sword just in time to block one of the surviving soldiers. He smiled when he felt the light weight of it, the perfect balance, and the way it captured much of the vibration caused by the block. It was the finest sword he had ever touched.

He knocked the soldier's sword away and drove it into his chest. Something in his mind told him that no, it wasn't the finest sword he had ever touched, but it would do.

Silas heard the snap of a bowstring, and turned in the direction of the sound, expecting an arrow to pierce him or the boy before he could finish the movement. He found the archer a dozen feet away, but his bow wasn't even aimed at them.

It was aimed at the wagon.

A cry echoed in the night as the arrow pierced the chest of one of the Cursed, and he fell backwards into the arms of the others. Two more twangs, and two more arrows found their way between the bars and into the prisoners.

Silas started to make a run for them, to cut them down before they could finish their dirty business, when a voice interrupted him.

"Going somewhere, Silas?"

He turned towards the Mediator's tent, which was on its way to being burned to ash. Standing in front of it was Roque.

"I'm setting them free," Silas said. He held the sword ready, but he knew it wouldn't be that useful against a Mediator.

"That is what you don't understand. You aren't setting them free." He looked over at the boy. "I can't let them leave here alive. I'm sorry."

Silas shouted and charged. Roque brought up his own blade and blocked it. They held the weapons close, each pushing back against the other.

"You used to understand," Roque said. "You used to believe in *him*."

Murderer, the voice whispered in his mind.

"I used to be a murderer," he said, giving a hard shove and breaking the clinch.

He brought the blade up and around again, but Roque backed out of reach. He could hear the cries of the Cursed in the wagon, and he saw that one of the soldiers had reached it with a torch, and was setting it on fire.

"How can you stand there and watch them kill innocent people?" he shouted at Roque. "They aren't more than children, and they're just like you!"

A tear ran from Roque's eye. A red tear.

"Because I have faith in *his* truth, as you used to." He held out his hand, pointing his fist at Silas. "*He* should have killed you, all those years ago."

Silas saw the ring on his finger, the red stone attached to the shining metal loop. He saw the flame within the stone, and he understood, but there was nothing he could do.

The fire shot at him like a lance, burning a hole in the air and heading straight for him. He was too close. He closed his eyes, ready to feel the flames take him, already sensing the heat on his face. When seconds passed, and he found he was still alive, he opened them.

He was laying on the grass, ten feet away from where he had started. Roque was in the same spot, the flames squelched, but his attention was somewhere else. Silas followed it with his eyes, and landed on the boy.

He was standing there with his hand out, a line of blood running from his eye and down his cheek, dripping off onto his shirt. "Leave him alone," the boy shouted.

"How?" Roque asked staring at the boy. He seemed surprised that he had been able to shove Silas aside. "Child, please, let me help you."

"Help me?" the boy cried. "Can you bring my parents back? Can you bring my brother back? Can you revive that girl in the wagon that you thought was me? How can you help me, when you've already hurt me in every way you can imagine?"

"Girl?" Silas said, not loud enough for either of them to hear. He came to another understanding; that the boy was no boy at all, but the girl the soldiers had been searching for. No wonder they had been so desperate to find her.

"I'm sorry," Roque said. "We can be overly... assertive, at times. It is only because we must. Please, come with me, and I will show you everything you need to see, to understand."

Silas heard the soldiers headed towards him. He rolled to his feet, sword in hand, just in time to block a soldier's downward stab, kick the blade away, and hack through the soldier's head. Two more were coming his way, and he charged towards them, taking them off guard, slipping between them. The Mediator's blade was incredibly sharp, and it took only a light touch to open deep wounds in both of their stomachs. They fell to the ground, groaning in pain.

"I don't want to understand," the girl said. Eryn, Silas remembered. That was the name the soldiers had given to the merchants on the Elling road. Eryn Albion. "There is no good reason to kill innocent people. You say you need me, you need Cursed for some reason that makes sense to you? If that was true, you would speak plain, not kill our families and take us against our will. Not kill us when we run away. How in the name of Amman does that make sense to you?"

They were the words that broke the Mediator's calm. His face twisted, and he brought his sword to bear. "You know nothing," he yelled.

Silas looked down at the dying soldiers. He saw the small hunting knife sticking out of the boot of the one on the left. He reached down and grabbed it, and turned back to Roque. The Mediator was rushing Eryn, as the first had. He pulled back his arm and let loose. The knife wasn't meant for throwing, but he had instincts and muscle memories he couldn't connect to his former life. Its flight was awkward, but its aim was true, planting itself in the side of the man's neck.

The wound caused Roque to stumble, and he dropped the sword, crashing into Eryn and falling on top of her. She screamed at him, struggling to get free, and then quieted.

Silas looked around. All of the horses had fled when the fighting had started. The chargers were trained for war, not whatever insane power the Cursed possessed. The trees and the soldiers' tents were burning. The red and gold Mediator's tent was sagging and ready to collapse. The wagon with the prisoners was on fire too, but there were no screams or cries for help, its inhabitants already peppered with arrows. The soldiers that hadn't yet been killed had seen Roque fall, and chose to run.

"I have to get her out of here," he said to himself.

He ran back to where Roque was laying over Eryn, grabbing him by the shoulder and pulling his dead body off of her. As he did, a slip of paper fell from his robes, floating to the ground next to him. He picked it up and stuck it in his pocket, and then looked to Eryn.

He worried for a moment that the Mediator had killed her, until he saw the throb of vein in her neck, still pumping blood. He bent down, scooping her up in one arm and lifting her over his shoulder. When he rose, he saw a blue stone laying behind her in the grass.

He knew that it must have been what she'd dropped, so he balanced Eryn on his shoulder and picked it up. He shoved it in his pants pocket with the paper, and then glanced back at Roque and the lustrous alloy blade laying next to him one last time. He could only imagine how much a sword like that would fetch him from Rappett or one of his contacts in Elling. He already knew he was keeping the one he took from the other Mediator. He let the idea go and started running as fast as he could, pushing through the trees in a desperate effort to get away before it all burned.

As he ran, Roque's words echoed in his mind.

"You used to believe in *him*."

"Who am I?" he asked.

It was a question he found himself asking with every step he took.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

Silas

Silas' luck was with him. When he reached the field, the dappled mare was still there.

"Aren't you a good horse," he said, patting its muzzle. He could feel the heat of the flames behind him. The fire would consume the trees, and then move on to the grass. There was no telling how much it would burn before it wound down, but he didn't want to be near it when it did.

He lifted Eryn and laid her carefully across the horse, and then climbed up behind her. It took some effort to get her positioned to ride unconscious, but he got her secure and then ordered the horse back south. He would have preferred to head towards Elling, but she needed help - food, water, and rest. There was only one place he knew he could get any of that in a short time.

The minstrels weren't all that happy when Silas returned with their horse, since they knew he had gone chasing after the soldiers. Once Sena saw Eryn; however, she changed from a bawdy wench to a tender caretaker. She helped Silas get her down off the horse, and guided him to their carriage, where they laid her out on a bench. Her breathing was shallow, and her head was soaked in sweat.

"She might have a fever," Sena said. "Where did you find her, anyway? And why is her head shaved?"

"The less you know, the safer you'll be," Silas replied. "I rescued her from *his* soldiers." She stroked Eryn's cheek. "Cursed, eh? She's a pretty young thing. She looks like she's

been to Heden and back. I'll go fetch some cold water and cloth."

"Thank you, Sena."

"You want something for yourself? A flagon, maybe?"

Silas felt the temptation. He always did. "No. Just some water." He watched Eryn's breathing. "I couldn't save them," he said to her when Sena left. "I'll save you."

He was standing at the door to the carriage when Sena came back, Robar trailing behind her. "I hear you have one whopper of a tale," the minstrel said. "Rescuing a Cursed from *his* soldiers? As far as I know, it's never been done."

"It isn't the kind of song you can sing in an Elling tavern," Silas said. "Not unless you want to be hung."

Sena pushed past, holding a bucket and a rag. "Excuse me. I have a patient to tend to."

"Maybe not around here," Robar said. "But Elling is only one province. There are towns on the other side of the Killorn where songs about rebel heroes will pay quite well indeed."

"Rebel hero? No. I made a promise, that's all."

"To who?"

Murderer.

"To myself," he said.

"Maybe you see it that way. I'm a storyteller, and I know what stories to tell to get the people to part with their coin. A story about a man rescuing a girl from *his* soldiers? That will pay well in Aspin, I'm sure of it. The point is, part with your story, and we'll take good care of you. We can even sneak you into Elling City, if that's what you want."

"Tell me more about Aspin first. My memory is a little shady these days, but from what I know, *his* control over the Empire is absolute."

Robar laughed. "Once upon a time, it was. But it's been over four hundred years. Four hundred! There's been talk that *he's* dead and has been for some time. Who lives that long, anyway? If *he* is dead, then who do we fear? The Overlords? *His* soldiers? I'm a performer. I don't get involved in politics, outside of the tales I can tell, but what I do know is that more and more people are questioning every day. More and more Cursed are showing up, and the townspeople and villagers are growing weary of having their sons and daughters taken away or killed for no reason at all. Once you throw in the others being taken to work the ore mines, this empire is ripe for rebellion."

Silas was surprised to hear such open talk about such things. "Are you a performer, or a trouble maker?"

Robar laughed even harder at that. "Is there a difference? I tell tales based on what I see and hear. I may embellish, but everything has a ring of truth. Even 'Your Merry Stones'. The anger is simmering just below the surface, even here. It's only a matter of time before it begins to materialize into action."

Silas was considering the minstrel's words when he heard a small groan from the carriage. "Let me care for my charge. We'll speak later. Don't even entertain the idea of bringing *his* soldiers here. Even if they caught me, I would be sure to kill you first."

Robar's mirth faded, and he backed away.

Silas climbed up into the carriage, and shooed Sena out. "I need to speak to her alone," he said.

"Make sure her forehead is kept damp, it will help with the fever," Sena said. "I'll see if we have anything for her to eat." She gave Eryn one last worried look, and left.

Silas knelt down in the center of the carriage, leaning over Eryn's face. He took the

cloth and dunked it in the bucket, then squeezed it and ran it along her head. She groaned again, and her eyes opened just a hair.

"You," she said.

"Do you know me, child?" he asked.

Her eyes opened the rest of the way, and she tried to sit up. "The soldiers," she said in a harsh whisper.

Silas put his hand to her chest, and gently shoved her back down. "Rest, child. You're safe here."

She didn't resist him. "Where are we?"

"How much do you remember? Keep your voice low. You are safe, but your words may not be."

"I saw you," she said. "I saw you at the merchant's. You bought a bowl of stew. I knew who you were, from what the soldiers said. A man with white hair and blue eyes. I followed you to make sure. I thought you could help me."

"Help you?"

"Yes. The soldiers, they.... They..."

Silas dunked the cloth again, using it to dampen her forehead as Sena instructed. "Shh... you don't have to say it, child. I'm aware of what *his* soldiers do." *I used to be one.*

"The soldiers went by on horses. I saw a girl who looked like me. I thought they took her because she looked like me. I didn't want them to kill her because I escaped." She pushed herself up again. "Is she here? Is she safe?"

Silas wasn't sure what to say. He decided that lies would only extend the pain. "I'm sorry. I tried to save them all. Do you remember?"

She shook her head, and started to cry. Silas sat there, his hand holding the cloth over the bucket.

Murderer.

Her tears broke his heart. He dropped the cloth, and reached out tentatively. She wrapped her arms around him and held him tight, sobbing into his shoulder.

"She died because of me," she said. "Because I got away. It isn't fair."

Silas held her, and rubbed her back. He couldn't even remember the last time he had comforted someone. Had it been his son, so many years ago when he was just a boy? Before he had developed the Curse? Before he had ordered for him to be hunted down? The pain she was feeling, he had caused. Not only to her, but to countless others. He felt the bite of it in his heart.

"Eryn," he said. "That is your name, yes?"

He felt her nod against his neck.

"Eryn, it isn't your fault. You did everything you could. I was there in the trees. I saw you come out, with a stone in your hand."

He pushed her away with utmost care, and reached into his pocket, finding the blue stone there. He took it out and showed it to her, and then turned her hand over. There was a burn on her palm, in the perfect size of the stone.

"You used your Curse to make this stone send lightning everywhere. I don't know how you did that. You set fire to the trees, and the tents. Do you remember any of it?" He dropped the stone into her open palm.

She shook her head again, but she had stopped crying when she saw the stone. "I took that stone from a woman in black robes. Her name was Lia. She killed my brother Roddin, and she tried to kill me too."

"They're called Mediators," he said. "They're Cursed, like you. They have power, like you."

"Did I kill the girl?" she asked.

"No. When I saw you, I came out to protect you. I killed one of the Mediators, and the soldiers began firing arrows at the prisoners."

"Prisoners? There were more than one?"

Silas nodded. "There were seven. I don't know if the girl was Cursed, or if they just thought she was. The rest surely were. They didn't fight back, not like you did. I've never seen a Cursed fight back like you did."

She looked like she was going to cry again, but she didn't. "I don't remember it," she said.

"You saved my life. There was another Mediator, he had a red ring that shot fire at me. Somehow you threw me out of the way. You stood up to him."

"I wish I could remember. Did you kill him too?"

"Yes."

"Good."

Silas couldn't help but smile. "That was when you fell unconscious. I carried you out of the trees and brought you back to the minstrels. You have a fever, Eryn. You need to rest."

"The soldiers?"

"They'll be along soon enough, looking for both of us, I'm afraid. But not tonight."

Eryn laid back down and closed her eyes. Silas reached into the bucket to retrieve the cloth, and wiped her forehead with it again. There was a knock on the carriage door.

"It's me," Sena said. "I have some soup for the girl."

Silas leaned over and opened the door. The minstrel handed him a cup of hot soup. "Tell

Robar I'll do my best to help him fashion the greatest story ever told. My only request is that he gets the girl and I into the city unseen by *his* soldiers."

Sena pursed her lips and nodded. Silas brought the soup over to Eryn. "Drink this," he said. "You'll need your strength."

She sat up again, and took it from him. "What are we going to do now?"

"What do you mean we?" Silas had saved her from the soldiers. That was all he had ever intended to do.

"I need your help," she said. "I'm from a small village called Watertown. The soldiers destroyed it. My parents and brother are dead, because they destroyed them too. I want to find *him*, and I want to kill *him*. What is it that you want, Silas?"

It was the first time she had used his name. He hadn't even known she knew it. She was a strong one, he realized. She had followed him, in order to help him try to save the girl, because she didn't want her to die in her place. She had used her Curse to save his life, and to try to save the prisoners, when most Cursed he had seen were too terrified of it to call on it for anything.

"Well?" she asked.

He knew he didn't want to lie. Not to himself, or to her. Not anymore.

Murderer.

"I have to tell you something, Eryn. It is... difficult for me to say, and it will be difficult for you to hear. When I'm done, you may not ever want to speak to me again."

She tilted her head. Her eyes were bloodshot, and she looked sweaty and tired. He knew he shouldn't be telling her this, not now while she was sick, but he couldn't bear the thought of not telling her. She was Cursed, like his son had been. She deserved to know.

"I don't know everything. My memories are like the lights in the sky, and when I try to

reach out and grab at one, I always come away empty handed. Some of them have fallen recently, and I've discovered things about myself that I had spent many years trying very hard to forget. The most important one is that I used to be in *his* army. I used to be one of *his* soldiers."

He raised his hand, because she looked like she was going to speak, maybe to comfort him, or maybe to scream at him. He wanted her to hear him out. She took a drink from the soup instead.

"It is more than that. I wasn't just a soldier, I was a commander. I was in charge of other soldiers. What happened to your village, and your parents..." It was here he began to break down, to lose himself in the anguish of the memories. He choked on the words, but he fought through it. "I've given those orders. I've sent soldiers to burn down houses, and murder innocent people. I've murdered them myself."

Murderer.

Eryn dropped the bowl of soup, spilling it all over the floor. She didn't take her eyes from him. She hung on every word.

"I was married. I had two sons. Teran and Aren. Teran wanted to be like his father, so he joined *his* army. Aren was a scholar, and he spent his days with books. Then, when Aren was eighteen, he decided he was done with learning, and he went off to become a farmer. He took a wife, and he moved to a village near Root."

Silas was crying now as he spoke, the tears dripping from his face onto the floor, mixing with the spilled soup.

"I received a report that there was a farmer in one of the villages who was Cursed. After some investigation, I found out that it was Aren. I told my wife what I had learned, and I told her what I knew I had to do. You can imagine how much she hated me for even suggesting it, but I

went through with it anyway. I dispatched a Mediator and a squad of soldiers to bring him in."

He looked up at her, and met her eyes. He saw the anger, and the coldness. He saw the hate and the rage. He didn't shy away from it, instead absorbing every thought that he imagined could be going through her head.

"They never brought him in."

Murderer.

"My wife left me the day the soldiers came and told us that he had run, and the Mediator had killed him. She wanted to get away from this place, from *his* empire. She found a ship that was sailing across the sea to the unknown lands, lands that none have ever returned from. She said she would rather be smashed upon rocks, or drown in the deep ocean, than ever have to look at my face again.

"Since I've remembered these things, I swore to myself that I would do my best to make up for them. That I would do what I could to protect the Cursed, to save the lives of innocents, and to fight against *his* rule. It won't bring Aren back, and it won't bring Alyssa back, but maybe there is some good in these old bones. Maybe I can at least die as a man my love would be proud of. You ask me what I want, Eryn. That is it."

The silence stretched on. He waited for her reaction.

"I want you to get out," Eryn said. "Just leave me alone."

Silas nodded, and rose to his feet.

"I'll have Sena bring you more soup."

CHAPTER TWENTY

Silas & Eryn

Somehow Eryn managed to hold herself together, until after Silas had left and Sena had brought her a fresh bowl of soup. She drank the soup under the woman's watchful eyes, and then was ordered to lie down and rest. Only once the minstrel had left her alone did she give herself the opportunity to cry.

Except she surprised herself. She didn't cry in anger about what Silas had told her, even though she had plenty of anger about it. She didn't even cry because he was not what he had seemed. She found that the tears she shed were first for Aren, Silas' son who he had killed, and second for Silas himself. She had seen the guilt and pain in the man's eyes while he had told her his story. She had seen the agony he was in, every time he returned to those memories. What she had seen was a repentant man, a remorseful man.

She knew how *he* took people in, and forced them to become something they weren't. Master Lewyn had always been kind, until it was his wife's life at stake. But, Silas had made a choice. He had decided to become a soldier, to be a commander, and to kill his own son. Did it matter that he was sorry for it now? Could she forgive him, and see him as the man who came to her aid to rescue the Cursed? Or would she see only the soldier, every time she looked at his weathered face?

"Amman," she said softly in prayer. "Help to guide me. Help me to understand the evils that people do, and their capacity to change. Help me to believe in forgiveness, and to forgive

one who has wronged so many, and yet wishes to make things right."

She closed her eyes, sending her thoughts to her God, wherever He may be. The priests said Amman lived among the clouds, and smiled down on those He favored. The priests said that Amman had love for all of his children. The same priests also said that Amman despised the Cursed, and that was why He afflicted them so, but Eryn had never believed it. How could both of those things be true?

"If Amman can forgive, then I can forgive," she said, making her choice. Silas had proven himself to her, both in his actions at the camp, and for saving her life, and for revealing so much of his past to her even though he knew she might despise him for it. She had lost so much already. She didn't want to lose the only ally she had found who might be able to help her succeed in her goal.

She took a deep breath, finding peace and comfort in her decision. Now she just had to convince him that they should travel together. She fell asleep with that thought in mind.

Silas walked past Robar, when the minstrel approached outside the carriage. He looked straight ahead, his eyes itching from his tears, and kept going until he reached the small fire the bards had made. He could hear echoes in the distance, shouting and yelling, no doubt in warning about the flames that were still raging to the northeast.

He sat down and stared into the campfire, his mind racing with the memories he had shared with Eryn. He saw the face of his wife in the flames, proud and strong but also tender and loving, her brown hair streaked with grey. She hadn't been anything extraordinary in her looks,

but she had the incredible heart it took to love someone in spite of their disagreements and opposing loyalties. She had never been in favor of *his* policies on the Cursed, or on the mines. She had been willing to accept that he had, to a fault. At least until it had cost her son.

Next was the face of his son, Teran. He wondered if the boy was still alive. He should be married by now, and maybe have children of his own. If he could ever settle down and have children. He remembered that his firstborn had been as ambitious as they came, running off to join *his* army on his sixteenth birthday, the very moment he was free to enroll as an adult.

Aren had been so different. Quiet and thoughtful, every bit his mother's son. He had a strength of his own, one that he bolstered with words and kindness instead of sword and bow. He had always seen a hidden fire in his second son, sitting just below the surface of the calm and wise exterior. He had never imagined what he was seeing was the Curse, laying in wait to claim him.

That was what he remembered. There was still so much he didn't. How had he come to join *his* army? Where had he trained? Who did he know? Why had he been allowed to stop serving? Where had the vicious wound across his body come from, and how in the name of Amman did he survive it?

It was question, after question, and no matter how hard he tried to bring his past to the surface, there was still so little he could recall. He saw Alyssa clearly now, and he could bring to mind most of the fighting they had done over Aren. He could remember bits and pieces of things in flashes of images and voices.

Murderer.

Almost all of the memories had to do with his time as a soldier, moments in the time of the one part of his life he most wished he could forget. But did he? Would he be the same today,

if all of that pain was taken away, and only the good came back? Would Eryn be alive, if he had no cause to help her? Would he even care to help the Cursed, or would he settle somewhere, and spend his days reminiscing on a past he could never recapture?

Even so, he found no comfort in the vast holes of his past. He may have spent years in the gutter, scrounging for enough coin to keep himself drunk, but he would have thought he could recall something about himself. His parents? His birthplace? It was as though he had not existed, and then he had, his entire life already arranged.

Silas reached into his pocket, seeking the paper he had taken from Roque's corpse. It was the message that the rider had been in such a hurry to deliver that he hadn't waited for the Mediator to reach the collection point. He took it out now, and turned so he could hold it up to the fire light.

Roque,

If you are sure it is him, you must prevent him from reaching Elling. If he has somehow thrown off the yoke of inebriation, it won't be long until he comes for me. You cannot allow this to happen! I don't need to remind you how dangerous he is, and how much more dangerous he can become if his memories return. Find him. At all cost, find him!

- Iolis

Silas stared at the note for a long time. He was certain that it was in reference to him, though he was unfamiliar with the sender's name. Who was Iolis, and why would he seek him out? It was clear the man didn't wish him to.

"He knew I was drunk, but he didn't know where I was," he said out loud. "How could

that be?" And why was he so afraid his memories might return? For that matter, how had this Iolis known he had lost them? All he had were more questions. The only thing he was sure of, was that at least some of the answers were to the north.

"Silas," Robar said, approaching him again. "May I sit?"

"If you can answer a question for me."

"Does it have to be the truth?" The minstrel smiled.

"Yes, although I don't expect you to know this answer. Who is Iolis?"

Robar started laughing. "How do you not know who Iolis is?" The look Silas gave him quieted his mirth. "His full name is Iolis Germaine Elling. He is the Overlord. The twelfth of his name."

"Sit," Silas said. The minstrel complied. Silas handed him the message. "Are you familiar with the Overlord's hand?"

Robar took the note and read it. "Very, very interesting," he said. He handed it back. "You are a mystery, aren't you, Silas? I was afraid of you before. I'm more afraid of you now. What is it like, to not know who you are?"

Silas glared at him. "Is that his hand or not, minstrel?"

Robar leaned back, putting a little more distance between them. "It is," he said. "I'm sure of it. The Overlord has to sign our permit to perform in Elling City each year. Entertainment taxes, you know. He wrote that note."

Silas looked at the paper again. "So the Overlord doesn't seem to want me to pay him a visit," he said.

"It certainly looks that way," Robar replied.

"There's good coin in mystery, isn't there?"

Robar nodded, his smile returning. "There certainly is, my friend."

"So you'll get me into Elling?"

"I wouldn't miss it for anything."

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

Silas

He had only been asleep for a couple of hours when Robar shook him awake.

"Soldiers," he said. "Coming down from the north. I had Jeson out keeping watch."

Silas sprang to his feet and grabbed the sword he had taken from the Mediator. "How many?"

"Twenty, or more. Too many for you to fight, too close for you to flee. This way." He brought Silas to the carriage, and knocked on the door. "Sena, can we enter?"

"Yes," his wife said. "Hurry."

Robar opened the door to the carriage and shoved Silas inside. Sena was there, but Eryn was gone.

"Where is she?" Silas asked. "She was too sick to leave."

"Silas, is that you?" The muffled voice came from beneath the bench seat of the carriage.

"Eryn?"

"She's fine," Sena said. "I don't know how, but even her fever has gone." She bent over and lifted the cushion of the opposite bench. She slid her hand along the wood until she found a latch of some kind, and flicked her wrist. Then she lifted the wooden surface, revealing a space just big enough for him to press himself into.

"It's going to be a tight squeeze," Robar said.

Silas climbed in. "It beats a grain sack any day." He lowered himself down and curled up.

Sena dropped the seat over him, and then the two minstrels sat, one on either side. A few minutes later, they heard the clomping of hooves, and Jeson's voice.

"Right you are, My Lord. Come around and take a look, all the time you need. We've got nothing to hide. We're just a band of minstrels, we play this route every year. You may have heard of us? 'Robar's Rapscallions', we're called."

As if on queue, Sena started yelling. "If I told you once, I told you a thousand times Robar, 'Your Merry Stones' is not appropriate for the Overlord!"

"But Sena, darling," Robar pleaded. "Even the Overlord has a sense of humor, I'm sure."

"Sense of humor? Is that why we were banned from Lord Malicent's manor? Because he has no sense of humor?"

"I didn't know she was his wife," Robar shouted.

"You lifted her skirt right in front of him," she cried.

"Yes, My Lord." Jeson's voice filtered in between their bickering. "That's Robar's carriage, he's in there with his wife. Yes, My Lord, they do that a lot."

"I heard that," the both shouted out of the carriage at once, before returning to their fighting.

"No, My Lord. I'm sure they'd be happy to speak to you." It was followed by a knock on the door.

"What do you mean?" Robar shouted. "I change every day."

The knock came again, more persistent.

"Robar, be quiet. Somebody's knocking."

The carriage shook as Sena went to the door to open it.

The voice outside was deep and gruff. "We're looking for two fugitives..."

"Aye, I've heard about the fugitives," Sena said. "A girl and a man with white hair, right? I ain't seen 'em."

She must have tried to swing the door closed, because it squeaked on its hinges. Silas heard a bump.

"Out, right now," the voice ordered. "Or your next show will be short a few instruments."

There was some shifting and shuffling. Silas could hear the two bards exit the carriage.

"Where are they?" the soldier asked. The tone of his voice worried Silas. He carefully pushed against the seat, but the latch was locked.

"I don't know what you're talking about," Robar said. "It's just the six of us. We've seen no others."

He heard the sound of metal against leather, and then a short gasp. Sena screamed.

"The five of you, now," the soldier said. His voice dropped. "Find the others, and bring them here."

Silas pushed against the bench again, but it didn't give.

"Eryn," Silas whispered, hoping she could hear him, but the soldier couldn't.

"Silas?"

She did hear him.

"We need to get out of here. Robar will either give us up, or they will kill the minstrels and burn everything they own to make sure they aren't hiding us somewhere. Can you get out?"

"Let me ask you again," the soldier said. "Where are they?"

Robar's voice was more panicked. "I told you, we haven't seen the fugitives. Killing my people won't make that any less true."

"Silas, mine's stuck too," Eryn whispered.

Silas considered bashing against the platform, but they would be caught for sure. "Your Curse," he said. "Can you use it to open the lock?"

"I don't know. I'll try."

Silas heard more shuffling feet; the rest of the minstrel troupe being brought before the commander.

"I'll ask you one more time, before I kill another minstrel," the commander said. "I know they're here, or were here. There was a messenger who survived an attack on one of our camps. He met us on the road to Elling. He distinctly remembers seeing a dappled mare in the field nearby. Keep that in mind when you answer my question. Where are they?"

Silas choked on his breath. He had overlooked the horse. Robar, his wife, and the rest of the minstrels were going to die, and it was all his fault. It didn't matter what they said, because they had already lied. They couldn't and wouldn't be trusted.

"Eryn?"

She didn't answer.

"Eryn?"

They needed to get out, now.

"Okay," Robar said. "The fugitive, Silas Morningstar, came into our camp. He demanded a horse. He threatened to kill my wife there. We had no choice." His voice was filled with fear.

"Eryn?"

She didn't answer. He had no choice but to try to break his way out. He closed his eyes and tried to coil as much force as he could into his body before he shoved against the seat.

"And he brought the horse back?" the commander asked.

"I... uh... I... we were sleeping," Robar said. "He must have returned with it in the middle

of the night."

Silas heard a small *click*. He released his tense body, and pushed lightly on the seat. It shifted up. She had done it! He pushed it open as slowly as he dared, and was greeted by a pair of brown eyes peering in.

"Silas?"

"Shhh.." Silas said. "We're going to have to fight our way out."

Eryn held up her bow. "I'm ready."

"Two more questions for you, minstrel," the commander said outside the carriage. "One, why didn't you tell me this the first time I asked? Two, why would he take your horse, and then return it?"

Silas climbed out of the hidden compartment, lifting the sword behind him. He leaned forward, and inched away the curtain covering their view of the outside. He saw the back of Robar and Sena's heads and the commander of the soldiers in front of them, a bloody knife in hand. The other three minstrels were being held by soldiers, who were flanked by three more soldiers on horseback.

Silas motioned for Eryn to give him the bow. She passed it over, and then drew an arrow from her quiver and handed it to him. He notched it and drew it back before using the tip to push the curtain aside once more.

"Well?" the commander asked. He walked over to one of the captives and put the knife to her throat. "I expect you'll have a reasonable answer."

"Please," Robar said. "She's done nothing. I... I let him take the horse. I... just kill me instead. You're going to kill me anyway. There's no point for you to kill her too."

He put his face right up to the female minstrel, and then looked at Robar. "You're right,"

he said. "Take her back to the others. We'll bring these three to the mines."

The three bards began to struggle at that, but the soldiers held them tight.

"We have to do something," Eryn whispered.

"No, we have to wait. The mines are a better fate than what will await them if we show our hand right now."

The soldiers pulled the minstrels away, leaving the commander and the three on horseback. The lead soldier approached Robar again.

"This is for lying," he said.

He turned, his dagger headed for Sena's throat.

The force from the arrow that pierced his shoulder pushed him off course and made him to drop the knife before it could reach her. He cursed in pain and surprise, grabbing for the shaft at first, and then thinking the better of it and going for his sword.

The hesitation and indecision was all Silas needed to pull open the carriage door, drop the bow, grab his sword, and jump out. He shoved Robar and Sena apart with his shoulders, and stabbed the soldier in the gut.

"You should have just left," he said to the man.

The men on the horses began to shout, drawing their swords. A few seconds later, another arrow came through the window of the carriage, hitting one of them in the neck and knocking him from his horse.

"You need to get out of here," Silas said, pushing Robar in the direction of their horses.

He ran towards the vacant charger and jumped, his foot catching the stirrup and helping him slide easily into the saddle. He wheeled the horse with confidence, pointing it towards the other two soldiers while another arrow flew out from the carriage. It missed its target, but it was

enough of a distraction to give Silas time to reach the man and easily slip his guard, planting the point of his own blade between a pair of ribs.

The remaining horseman spurred his own charger forward, sword out to his right and angling for the kill. Silas brought his own blade around, and they met in a sharp clash of metal. The Mediator's sword broke the other into pieces, the force of the impact leading the shining blade right through the soldier's neck. Both head and body tumbled from the horse and onto the grass.

"Eryn, it's time to go," Silas shouted. "Robar, take your wife and ride. Head east past the villages and make your way to the Killorn Mountains. They won't follow you."

"What about the others?" he asked. "They're musicians, not miners."

"I'm sorry. I truly am. We can't help them right now."

Robar grabbed Sena's hand and started running for their horses. The rest of the soldiers who had waited near the road were headed their way. Eryn popped out of the carriage, her bow and quiver across her back. Silas rode towards her, leaning over.

"Give me your arm," he said. She reached up and he took hold of her, pulling hard to bring her up behind him. "Hold on tight."

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

Eryn

The horse spun around, Silas turning it west towards the Baden. Eryn wondered why he was going that way. Would they be able to cross the river on the horse?

She wrapped her arms around him and held on as tight as she could. She couldn't help but notice the rough edge of the scar he had hidden under his shirt, and she nearly let go out of surprise at the feel of it. She caught herself in time, and focused on staying on the horse with him as it galloped through a small copse of brush and down the riverbank.

The soldier's horses were well trained, and the charger didn't even slow when it reached the river, instead plunging right in. They were lucky to have come down in a somewhat shallow spot, and the water didn't rise above the horses flanks.

The short time it took them to get through the river felt like an eternity. Eryn looked back, seeing the rest of the soldiers about to join them at the bank. There were at least ten of them, all mounted on similar steeds.

The west side of the river wasn't much different from the east. The bank sloped gently upward to a small outcropping of brush and trees, where it regained a second road that ran north to south on the west side. They galloped straight over it, and headed into a large, open field where the soldiers would have too easy of a time with their bows.

"They're going to shoot us out here," she said. This was all too much like the first time she had run.

Except Silas wasn't Roddin.

"You're right," he agreed, pulling on the reins and bringing the horse to a stop.

"What are you doing?" she asked.

"Get an arrow ready. It doesn't matter if you hit anything, it's just to keep them on guard."

He turned the horse around, and started racing towards them.

"Are you crazy?" she cried. She grabbed an arrow from her quiver and put it to the bowstring, holding onto the horse with the strength of her thighs. She was surprised by how smooth its gait was at this speed, and that it wasn't as hard to aim as she had expected.

"Now," Silas yelled.

She let go of her arrow, and watched it sail past one of the soldiers, barely grazing his shoulder. Even so, it gave him enough pause that his horse lost a step, and his own shot went way over their heads. The rest of the soldiers didn't fare much better, their aim altered by the surprise attack.

Their passing was a ring of steel, and a blur, but Eryn heard the grunt, and when she looked back she saw one of the soldiers fall from his horse.

"Again," Silas said, bringing the horse around in a tight turn. The soldiers had to maneuver around each other to get in position, and it left them at a disadvantage.

Silas killed two more on the second pass, the shining sword he held striking like the mouth of a snake, and taking deep bites through the soldiers' armor, their lone horse making for a difficult and agile target as he maneuvered it with his heels like he had ridden all of this life.

He slowed on the third pass, putting them in the middle of the scrum, creating a barrier that forced the soldiers to switch to their swords if they didn't want to risk hitting one another. Eryn didn't need to be so careful, and of the remaining six arrows she had, two of them found

flesh.

Silas was an expert with the blade, using it first in his left hand, and then tossing it with precision to his right to attack from the other side, all while their own charger continued to wheel and prance through the melee. The make of the weapon also proved a tremendous asset, tearing through the shirts of metal chain the soldiers wore as if it were no more than simple cloth.

Silas had dispatched all but two of *his* soldiers when they turned and fled, headed south down the road. He stayed the horse and watched them go until they vanished over the horizon. Then he dismounted.

"What are you doing?" Eryn asked, jumping off the horse behind him.

"Trying to find someone my size," he replied. He looked back at her. "Someone your size too, if I can. We could also use some more arrows."

He didn't need to ask. She ran to each of the bodies on the ground, taking the arrows she found, as well as their coin purses. She also discarded her homemade bow for one of theirs. A part of her was saddened to let go of one of the few pieces of her family she still possessed, but she knew they would want her to be practical, and the soldiers' bows were superior in every way.

By the time she was done, she had sixteen arrows in her quiver, a new bow, a larger purse of coin, and little else. Silas had come away empty-handed. They were both too slight of build to make use of the more burly men's armor.

Finished scavenging, they stood at the edge of the road together, with Silas holding the reins of the warhorse.

"Eryn, I..." he started to speak, but then paused, like he didn't know what to say. A few minutes ago he had been the most efficient and confident killer Eryn could imagine. Now he looked uncomfortable and ashamed.

"Silas, where are you headed?" she asked.

He looked at her, then towards the north. "I need to get to Elling," he said at last. "There are answers there, about who I am. But the main road isn't safe. Not before, and especially not after this. I'm going to head west, past the villages to the foothills of the Rushes. Then I'm going to go north to the sea. There are ships that sail inland to Elling Lake from there. I can probably trade this sword to be smuggled into the city by boat."

"I need to get to Elling too," she said. "I need to learn. About *him*, about *his* empire. I need to learn how to fight. I need to learn about my Curse if I can, and practice controlling it. You saw what the blue stone could do, but my hand hurts every time I touch something to it." She turned her palm over, showing him the burn. "The Mediators, they're Cursed, and they know how to use it to do powerful things without passing out. That means it can be done. I need to learn other things too, simple things, like how much coins are worth. Life in Watertown was so different, and easy."

She felt angry to have lost that life. She'd had her fill of crying though. She was going to survive.

"I won't make it on my own," she said. "I could use your help."

Silas didn't say anything. He just looked at her, as though weighing his options.

"You know who I am," he said.

She shook her head. "No. I know as much about who you were as you do. What I've seen of who you are? I've seen a man who is willing to die for a girl he never even met, and knew nothing about. You were at the camp, before I was. You were going to try to free those prisoners, whether I showed up or not. You protected me, and got me away when I was unconscious. You saved Robar and Sena back there, when you couldn't have known we would make it out alive."

"I knew we wouldn't make it out alive if I didn't do anything."

"You could have let the soldiers kill them, and waited for a better opportunity to escape. Silas, we are both headed to Elling. We should go there together."

He looked at the ground, as if inspecting it for something while he considered her suggestion. Then his eyes rose to meet hers. "If you travel with me, you will need to learn to use a sword. You will need to learn to hunt. You will need to learn everything I can teach you to help you stay alive. You will do what I say, when I say it, not because you are my slave, but because I am trying to teach you. The path I am taking to Elling will take nearly the rest of the season, and it will not be an easy path. The soldiers will come for us. Outside of the Mediators, what you've seen so far have mostly been guards and road patrol. There are more accomplished members of *his* army, and they will be coming to try to do what their lesser brothers could not."

He let go of the horse, and walked over to her, crouching down so they were at eye level.

"There is a very real chance that one or both of us will not survive the next few weeks."

"I understand," she said. She leaned forward and kissed him on the cheek. "Thank you for taking me."

She didn't know what kind of thoughts her kiss triggered in him, but Silas' eyes changed. It seemed to Eryn as if he was looking at somebody else.

"If we ride hard, we can be at Sumbury by nightfall," Silas said. "The soldiers will know that too, so we'll have to keep going through the night. If we can reach the Rushes ahead of them, it will be easier for us to disappear."

"What are the Rushes?" she asked.

"You'll see when we get there." Silas climbed onto the horse, and then helped her up. "It's just as well the armor wouldn't fit. The horse will be able to go further without tiring if it isn't

carrying all of the extra weight."

They rode west.

It was well into the night when they paused for the first time, having passed the village of Sumbury and left it far behind. They had both been upset to find it had been razed, and all of the inhabitants were either fled, taken to the mines, or killed. Silas had wrestled with the idea of resting there, in one of the buildings hollowed out by fire. In the end he had decided the soldiers might expect them to do that, making it unsafe.

"Consider this your first lesson," Silas had said to her. "The best way to survive is to be unpredictable. That's why we defeated the soldiers back at the river. The last thing they expected was for us to charge. You had an excellent idea."

She had been embarrassed by his praise. Especially since she didn't deserve it. She had only pointed out the obvious. "Is going to the Rushes unpredictable?" she asked.

He had smiled. "Very."

They had taken some vegetables from one of Sumbury's farms, and had eaten them while they rode. Now they were sitting in a field of tall, green reeds. It was a plant Eryn had never seen before, but the horse had taken an immediate liking to. She could tell Silas hadn't really wanted to stop moving, but their ride needed food and water too, and at least it provided good cover.

"Silas, can I ask you something?" She was still a little nervous about speaking to him. He looked so intense most of the time, like he was just waiting for something to jump out at them.

"You can ask me anything, Eryn."

"When we were riding away from the minstrels. I had my arms wrapped around you. I felt... something rough? A scar?"

Silas shifted onto his knees and lifted the front of his shirt, showing her the vicious wound. "I don't know where it came from," he said. "I don't even know how I could have survived it."

Eryn couldn't believe the scar. It ran across his entire body, and was so jagged and rough it was as though he had been cut in half and sewn back together. "You really don't remember anything?"

"Only what I told you. The only other thing I have is this." He took the note from Iolis out of his pocket and gave it to her. "It is a message that the Overlord sent to a Mediator named Roque. For some reason, the Overlord is afraid of me. He's afraid of what I'll recall. That's why I know I need to get to Elling. I'm hoping that if I can see him, I'll remember." He lowered his shirt, and sat back down with his legs crossed.

Eryn read the note. "I don't know the word 'inebriation'," she said.

"Drunk," Silas replied. "I spent the last ten years of my life drunk, all of the time. It was my way of forgetting about what I had done. To others, to my wife, to my son." He fell silent for a minute before continuing. "I would still be drunk, but the Constable of Root locked me up. I was going to turn in a Cursed, for the coin." He looked up at her. She knew he was waiting on her judgement.

"But you didn't."

"No. I tried to save him. That's what got me in trouble in the first place. I don't regret it. There are some things I don't understand though."

"Like what?"

"The Curse. The power of it. I saw what you did. Why didn't the prisoners try to use it to free themselves? And if it is so powerful, does *he* take the Cursed, or kill them, because *he* is afraid you would be powerful enough to overthrow *him*?"

Eryn thought about Malik, and his journal. It had suggested that the Curse turned him into a monster. What if he had been wrong? Maybe the two things were unrelated?

"Everyone in Watertown was terrified that they would be Cursed, or someone they knew would be Cursed," she said. "When I discovered I was one of them... for months I was terrified. After a while I was curious. I couldn't get rid of it, so I thought I should stop wishing it hadn't happened to me, and make the best of it. I didn't understand how it could be a bad thing to have the power to do things other people couldn't. Like opening a lock. Even so, it took a long time for me to be able to open myself up to the power. It still isn't easy, and other than doing small things I have no control. I just concentrate on what I want, and it sort of takes over. Having the Curse... Losing my family is the Curse. Being hunted is the Curse. Not what I can do with it."

"It makes me wonder," Silas said. "What if *he* is Cursed?"

Eryn thought about that. "Silas?"

"Yes?"

"The message. If *he* is Cursed... maybe *he* used *his* power on you. Maybe *he* made you drink. Maybe *he* made you forget? If not *him*... maybe it was the Overlord? How else would he have known you were drunk, and why else would he be afraid you'd remember?"

Silas didn't say anything after that, but she could tell by his face that he was beginning to wonder if she might be right. If the Overlord had been responsible, the question was, why?

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

Silas

It took four days for them to reach the outskirts of the Rushes. Silas had allowed them only a minimum of sleep, and had stopped for food only when he became desperate. He was impressed with Eryn, for she never complained. Not of the walking, or the hunger, or the thirst that he knew she must be sharing in. She even approached his lessons in foraging and hunting with enthusiasm, as though when he was teaching all of their other cares and needs fell away.

Try as he might, he found he was becoming attached to the girl. He knew he shouldn't, but he couldn't help it. The energy and strength she had exhibited made him feel ten years younger, and drove him to work harder to keep them both safe. He and Alyssa had raised only sons, but he knew that Eryn was exactly the kind of daughter he'd want to have.

Being around her had also helped him squelch the voice in his head, the constant guilt of what he had done. She had accepted his past, and forgiven him for it. She was willing to accept that he had changed, and he valued that more than he would ever let on. In the past he had been a murderer, a dark but effective weapon. In the present... he was still a weapon, but he fought for those who could not fend for themselves.

As far as he could tell, they had been successful in staying ahead of *his* soldiers. They hadn't seen a single red eye since they had headed west from the Baden, though they had also seen few enough villagers either. Many of the farms and small enclaves they had passed had already been burned to the ground, leading Silas to wonder if there was more to the activity than

just a growing occurrence of Cursed. That in itself was a cause for curiosity. Why were there suddenly so many more Cursed coming into the world? He knew the Curse revealed itself not long after boys and girls became men and women, in body if not in mind. Why had so many been born then, around the same time his son had died?

The Rushes were a series of flat masses piled on top of one another, and covered in a layer of moss, grasses, brush, and short trees. In some places, they looked like steps for giants, leading up into the skies. In others, they were sheer cliffs like the walls of a castle. They rose and sunk as far as they could see, covering the entire horizon from north to south.

"It doesn't look like anybody lives here," Eryn said, upon seeing them. "I don't know why not, it's beautiful."

"It is beautiful," Silas said. "The beauty isn't of much use to farmers. The terrain is too uneven to plant large crops on, and it would be too much work to bring livestock to graze there."

Silas took the saddlebags from the horse, draping them over his shoulder. They weren't very heavy, since they were filled with bread and vegetables. He had been hoping for salted meat when they had purchased it in a village called Croughton, but it turned out *his* soldiers had been through not long before on their way to retrieve a Cursed, and had taken all of the meat the villagers hadn't had time to hide away.

He smacked the horse on the rump and shouted. It whined, and then headed back the way they'd come.

"It's hard to hide anywhere with a horse," he said to Eryn, in answer to the look she was giving him. She didn't argue.

They walked until nightfall, reaching the top of the first set of stepped mounds of earth. From there they could see back the way they had come, for miles across the plains. If the soldiers

came with any kind of light to guide their way, they'd be seen well before they could catch up to them.

"I'll take the first watch," he said. "This is the best chance for sleep you'll have for some time."

Eryn laid down on the thick green grass that coated the Rushes. She put her arms behind her head to support it, and closed her eyes. Silas watched her for a while, until her breathing was deep and even, and then he went and sat on the graded edge of the step, where he'd be able to see if any soldiers approached. He reached into his pocket and took out the Overlord's message again.

He stared at it, considering what she had said to him days before. It was a thought that he was having trouble accepting, but having even more trouble denying. He had seen some of what the Cursed could do. How could he dismiss that they could have made him forget?

The answers would come, he was sure of that.

Four hours passed without incident. Silas kept his eyes down the slopes of the Rushes, expecting to see the orange dot of a torch crest the invisible horizon at any moment. He had known they had traveled light and fast, but he still hadn't expected to have more than a day's distance.

"Unless the soldiers aren't coming," he whispered to himself. "Maybe we aren't so important after all."

He walked over to where Eryn was sleeping on the grass, and knelt down beside her.

"Eryn," he whispered.

Her eyes shot open, and her body tensed.

"It's okay," he said. "It's just me. You're safe."

She relaxed and smiled up at him. "Is it my turn?" she asked.

"Yes. Keep a close eye to the east."

He helped her up, and then took her place on the ground. He closed his eyes, but sleep didn't come easily. This wasn't the first time he had asked her to stand watch, but it was the longest. He needed to trust her. He couldn't afford not to.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FOUR

Eryn

Eryn looked back at Silas, sleeping on the grass where she had been lying an hour before. She felt a contentment in her heart every time she saw him. He was someone to look up to, and be the father that she had lost. A father who could understand her, and who wanted to help her survive.

"Thank you Amman, for delivering a savior to me," she said.

Not that he would ever replace her real father. Every time she thought of him she was both happy and sad. She wondered how proud they would be, to see her fighting against *his* wrongs. To see her working hard to learn everything that Silas had to teach.

She returned her gaze to the distant east, watching and waiting for the first sign of soldiers. While she kept the watch, she tried to practice calling on her Curse. She focused on her breath, and her concentration, and on staying calm. She didn't ask the power to do anything, but just to come to her, and thrum below the surface of her skin until she let it go. She practiced building it within her, gathering it slowly. She needed to be able to use it and not pass out.

She felt the tingle between her ears, and the energy coursing down her spine. She held it, pooled it, and then let it go. It faded more slowly, the more she gathered. If she brought it on too fast, her head began to hurt. If she brought it too slow, it would eke away before it could be used for anything. She needed to discover the right measure, the right mix. It was not an easy task.

It took two hours before she felt like she had succeeded a single time, and even then it

left her sweaty, with the blood running from her eye and down her cheek to drip onto the grass. She saw the sun beginning to peak up above the horizon, and she quickly folded the cuff of her shirt and wiped away the blood. She didn't want Silas to worry about what she was doing.

He came up behind her just as she finished.

"Good morning, Eryn," he said.

She felt her heart flutter while she wondered if he had seen. She didn't think he would be one to stay quiet if he disapproved, so she decided if he had seen, he didn't mind, but he probably hadn't.

"Good morning, Silas. Isn't it incredible?" She pointed at the horizon.

It was, from up on the steps of the Rushes. The sky was filled with color.

"Look," Silas said, pointing down. At the base of the steps, nearly hidden by shadow, were *his* soldiers.

"I never saw them," Eryn said, worried that she had failed in her duty. She had been so preoccupied with trying to control her Curse, she had never noticed them riding in.

"It isn't your fault. To be this close, they had to have crested the horizon during my watch. I should have seen them."

He walked over to the grass and scooped up the saddlebags and his sword. Eryn followed suit, strapping on her own sword, and grabbing her quiver and bow.

"They'll be coming at nightfall," he said. "Hoping that we won't have seen them. They can't know how close they came to us either. We'll walk for half the day, and then try to find someplace to lie in wait. Maybe they'll go right by."

They started walking, north now, towards the sea. The terrain stayed grassy and green, but in some places became much more steep, both up and down. Before long they were in a

winding crevasse about ten feet wide and twenty feet deep. The sides were solid rock, but coated in a layer of green and blue moss.

Eryn had her sword in hand, practicing the two basic defensive maneuvers Silas had gone over with her so far. She stepped into a fighting posture and pretended an attacker was thrusting their sword towards her. She stepped back and turned to the right, bringing the blade up in a simple parry. Then she stepped back and turned left, completing a similar move.

"Very good," Silas said. He was walking ahead of her, but he would look back every now and then. "Your form is improving. Make sure you keep the blade up."

She nodded and repeated the move a few more times.

"Try not to wear yourself out. I know you're young, but we still have a few more hours to walk."

Eryn smiled. She wasn't close to being tired. In fact, she felt wonderful. She repeated the posture again, stepping back and turning left.

Something reflected in the shiny metal of the sword. Eryn focused on it, and saw a yellow eye.

"Silas!" It was all she had time for. Something barreled into her, sending her sprawling onto the soft earth. The sword fell from her hands.

He had his own blade out and ready, but he stood there, looking for her attacker. She turned her head, searching. Then she saw something at the top of the crevasse. A pair of yellow eyes, black skin, a mouth curled back in a snarl, full of sharp teeth. It looked vaguely like a person, but it was bent and twisted and scaly. It looked at her, and vanished.

Eryn pushed herself to her feet and picked up her sword. She held it up in front of her and walked towards Silas.

"What are they?" she asked.

"I didn't see anything," he replied.

She saw it. It was right behind him. It appeared from nowhere, shimmering as it came into view. It had sharp nails at the end of long fingers, raised up to strike.

Silas ducked and turned as the hand came down, avoiding the blow and bringing his blade up and through its stomach in one swift move. The creature howled and fell to the ground. He had to have seen its reflection in the sword.

There was howling and chittering now, and she thought she saw motion against the side of the passage. When she turned to look, another of the monsters came into view, jumping towards her.

Silas' hand grabbed her wrist and pulled her back out of harms way. The creature hissed and tried to spring towards her again, but Silas kicked it in the face. It tumbled backwards and disappeared.

"We need to get out of here," Silas said, holding her wrist and running along the crevasse. He only made it a few feet before something slammed into him, knocking him against the wall. It appeared with its hand around his throat.

"No," Eryn cried, thrusting forward with her blade. It sank into the creature's back, and the monster let go. "Come on, Silas."

She took the lead, running along the natural corridor. Silas followed behind. They couldn't see their attackers, so there was no way to know if they were close, or even if they were still coming for them.

She found out when three of the creatures appeared in front of her, blocking their way forward. Eryn came to a stop and looked back at Silas. He had turned around, because there were

three more behind them.

"They're boxing us in," Silas said.

She looked up to the top of the crevasse. There were more of the things on either side.

"What are they?" she asked.

"Not human," he replied.

They were moving in slowly, cautious of the swords. Silas pressed his back against hers.

"Have you ever seen anything like this before?" she asked.

"No. Never. These are the stories parents tell their children to scare them into compliance. Now we know the real reason nobody has settled here."

"What are we going to do?"

The creatures were getting closer. Above them, the others howled and chattered, the pitch rising in intensity.

"We have to fight."

Eryn took a deep breath. She knew she was going to die, unless she did something. She could try to use her Curse, but how? There were too many to throw aside, and she could never get to the blue stone before the monsters got to them. What good was it, if she didn't have it when she needed it?

One of the creatures bounced forward, and then rocked back, testing her. She poked towards it with the sword, then retreated and turned, ready to parry an attack that didn't come.

"Get ready," Silas said. The howling had gotten so loud, she could barely hear him above it.

She reached for her Curse. She wasn't sure what she was going to do with it, but it had saved her before without her direct command. She hoped if she had the power ready, it would

happen again.

It was difficult to concentrate, surrounded by the black, humanoid monsters with the sharp fangs and terrifying eyes. Eryn closed her eyes and thought about working the forge with her father, pumping the bellows to keep the oven hot and the steel malleable. There was a rhythm to the bellows, a song to the up and down motion, and the soft sound that came out with each blow. She thought about that, found that rhythm in her mind, and didn't let it go.

Time seemed to slow. She was vaguely aware of the creatures around them, crying out for their blood. She heard Silas scream her name, the sound coming so slowly that it stretched into nothing more than a deep rumble like thunder. Above it all she heard the bellows, felt the motion, played the song.

She opened her eyes. She felt the power of the Curse between her ears, and coursing throughout her whole body. Everything was moving as though time was almost standing still.

She stepped forward, her own body moving in normal time. Was she moving faster, or was everything else moving slower? She didn't know, and it didn't matter. She took her sword, and stabbed one creature, and then another, and then another. She plunged the blade into each of them, her motions so accelerated compared to theirs that they had no time to defend themselves. There was a part of her that felt guilty for killing them in such a way, but when she looked at Silas, and knew they would kill him if she didn't, it eased her mind.

With the monsters around them mortally wounded, she put her sword in its scabbard and drew her bow. She pulled arrow after arrow, sending them upward and into the creatures around them. Her aim wasn't the best, so it took more shots than there were monsters. It didn't matter, she hit them all before they could move.

All the while, she could feel the tingling, the power running through her, the wetness of

the blood under both of her eyes. Whatever she had done, she knew when the power fled she would pay for it. She only hoped that Silas would get them to safety.

She leaned up to his nearly frozen cheek and kissed it, and then shoved him out of the way of a sharp claw. She stepped back behind the creatures and closed her eyes. She could still feel the rhythm of the bellows. She could still see herself at the forge with her father, keeping the fires hot.

"I love you, father," she said.

He looked up at her, his face streaked with sweat. "I love you too, my darling girl. I'm proud of you."

She let the memory go.

CHAPTER TWENTY-FIVE

Silas

Silas saw the creatures coming at him. He raised his sword, ready to strike, not noticing the one that had come at him from the side, its sharp claws ready to rip into his side.

"Eryn," he cried, giving her warning of the attack.

The word hadn't even finished coming from his mouth, when he found himself stumbling forward, avoiding the unseen attack. Around him, the creatures were screaming, gushing blood, and falling to the ground.

"Eryn," he said again. He spun around, searching for her, finding her in the center of the carnage, laying on the ground with blood running from both eyes. What had she done?

A body plummeted from the side of the crevasse, landing on its back, an arrow jutting from its neck. He looked up and saw the rest of the beasts were gone. Or dead? He saw the bow lying next to her, and that her quiver was half empty. Somehow, she had attacked them all in the span of a single breath. Somehow, her Curse had made her impossibly fast.

He didn't know all that it meant, but he knew enough. He bent down and put his ear to her chest, hearing her heart still beating. She was unconscious again, but alive. He picked her up, carrying her like he had from the soldier's camp. He didn't have a horse to help them get away this time.

He took her as far as his legs would bear, out of the crevasse and upward, to higher, more defensible ground. It was a slow and grueling climb, but he was desperate to get her to safety.

His soldiers would be on the move by now, and he needed to find a place for them to hide. It would have been difficult enough with her awake.

Not that he could fault her. She had saved his life with her Curse. She had been right, he realized. The Curse was the way she was hunted, not the powers that she held. Although, he could only imagine how such an ability could be abused by the wrong person. He was grateful Eryn had such a strong, kind soul.

Good fortune was with them. They were almost to the top of one of the flat, stepped hills when Silas spotted a thick covering of trees and brush two steps down on the western side. The trees abutted a curved outcropping of rock from the next step up, and he was sure that he could see the dark shadow of a cave of some kind nestled in between.

He hated to have to leave her alone, but Silas placed Eryn on the ground. He took her book and quiver from her, and rushed towards the trees. He didn't even try to descend the steps on his feet, but rather allowed himself to slide on his back. Small stones tore into his cloak and scraped him, but he ignored the pain. He didn't have a lot of time.

"There you are," he said, reaching the trees and finding that there was a small cave pushing into the side of the hill. It was four feet tall, and eight feet wide, a crack in the earth that vanished into the depths. Silas notched an arrow to Eryn's bow and held it ready while he ducked under the lip of the cave, walking in a tight crouch. He was dependent on nothing more than luck that the space wasn't occupied by anything dangerous.

Small rodents scurried away from him, and he felt his head brush by creatures that turned out to be bats, who flapped in his face and evacuated the cave.

He only went in about ten feet. The light wouldn't penetrate any further, and he had no way to create his own. The ceiling had gotten lower and lower as he progressed, so he didn't

think it continued much further. He turned and ran back out of the cave. When he reached the outside, he began collecting wood from the ground around the trees.

Within an hour, he had started a fire at the mouth of the cave, a small one that produced little smoke. He collected leaves and branches and brush to cover the cave face from sight, and then removed his cloak and threw it into the corner. Finally, he began taking the items from Eryn's quiver, so that he could place it and the bow inside the cave. The first thing he found was a coin purse, and he opened it laid it next to him, to put the other items in.

He marveled once more at the blue stone when he transferred it to the purse, and he was curious about the red crystal clasp, holding it up and turning it in his hand while he wondered if it had power like the stone did. Neither affected him like the final item he found, shoved into the corner and nearly forgotten.

He held it up in front of him, turning it so it would catch as much light as possible. He examined it closely, measuring the size and the shape. Then he felt the inner edge, tracing his hands over a light but identifiable scoring.

His eyes filled with tears, and he couldn't breathe.

He knew the ring he was holding. He had given it to Alyssa on their wedding day.

Always.

That was what he had paid the artisan to inscribe on the inside of the band, a promise of his devotion. How in Heden did it wind up in Eryn's quiver?

He closed his eyes, trying to remember. He saw Alyssa again, right before she left to sail away to the unknown lands. She wasn't wearing the ring. When had she lost it? Who had she lost it to?

He saw her, the day he had told her what he had done.

Murderer.

She had called him that, and worse. She had slapped him, and punched him, and thrown things at him. He blinked his eyes quickly, trying to clear the tears. She hadn't been wearing the ring then either. Why not?

Silas clutched the ring tight, squeezing it so hard it began to cut into his hand. He kissed the outside of his hand, and then placed the ring in the coin purse. He would ask Eryn about it later. Right now, he had work to do.

He finished setting up the camp, and rushed back to where he had left Eryn, praying that she had been safe in the hours he was gone. He found her right where he had left her, still resting almost peacefully on the thick carpet of grass.

"Where did you get it?" he asked her sleeping form.

He looked at her closely. The shape of her face, the set of her eyes, the rise of her nose. He saw something there, features that could have belonged to Aren. Could she be his grandchild? He shook his head. It was so easy to see things that weren't there, to fill in the blanks for the explanation that he sought so desperately. Aren had been Cursed. The Cursed couldn't have children. Everyone knew that.

The thought saddened him. How proud he would be to have a grandchild like Eryn. He put a gentle hand to her face, and then picked her up again. He turned and looked back at the campsite he had made, and then he headed south.

It didn't take him long to find the soldiers. They too had left the horses behind to climb up into the Rushes. They moved on foot, trying to be quiet, but metal armor would never be good at that. They had spread out along the steps, their eyes seeking signs of his and Eryn's passage. He crouched with her behind a thorny bush, watching and waiting. The timing was everything.

The soldiers swept ever closer to his spot behind the bush. He was still on a step over them, so it would be hard for them to locate him there. He had his sword laying on the ground in front of him, but he hoped he wouldn't need it. That wasn't what he had worked so hard for.

The soldiers came closer.

One of them was on the step below him, only a dozen feet from the bush. The moment his commander gave them the order to move up, Silas would be forced to kill him. He reached down and grabbed the hilt of his sword, readying himself for that moment. Eryn lay next to him, still asleep.

A silent alarm came cascading through the line, a hand signal passed from one to the next to follow to the west. They had found the camp. He had tried to hide it, but he hadn't done a good enough job.

He had done a perfect job.

They rushed off, and Silas picked Eryn up and carried her south behind them. His body ached everywhere, and he was hungry, thirsty, and tired, but both of their lives depended on him. He refused to let her down.

He nearly collapsed from exhaustion more than once. When he crossed back through the crevasse where the monsters had attacked them, he was surprised to find the creatures were gone, the only evidence they had ever been there the blood stains and discarded arrows on the grass. He hoped that something worse hadn't come and claimed them, or if it had that it wouldn't show itself to him. He made it through without trouble.

Night had fallen by the time he found himself behind another bush, every muscle in his body screaming for relief. He was looking down on the soldier's base camp, where they had left a single man to care for their horses while they conducted the search. He would stay for a few days, and if they didn't return he would bring the horses back to Elling and the soldiers would have to walk their way home.

Faced with the soldier, Silas wished he had kept the bow. The sword was a risky proposition, especially in his state of weakness.

"I'll be right back," he whispered to Eryn. He looked over the bush again, finding the soldier facing away from him, sitting in front of a small fire. He had his cloak raised up to keep himself warm, so Silas couldn't even see his face.

He crept down the slope of the first step, taking seconds between each footfall to ensure that he didn't make a sound. He kept his ears and eyes focused on the surrounding area, in case more than one of *his* men had stayed behind.

Minutes passed. He inched closer. The only sounds he heard were the crackle of the flames, and the beating of his heart. To his left, the horses shifted and whined, unsure of the newcomer. The motion got the attention of the soldier, and he turned his head.

"What's wrong, boys?" the voice asked.

A woman's voice.

His army didn't allow women.

Unless they were Mediators.

Silas stopped.

She turned around, and smiled.

"Silas, I presume?" she asked. "It's an honor to meet you."

She was only a little taller than Eryn, her hair straight and black, her features sharp. She had almond-shaped eyes, and a tiny nose, and wore a simple black dress with the red eye painted on the chest.

He stood still, trying to decide what to do. Whatever happened, he had to protect Eryn.

"An honor?" he asked.

She smiled. "I forgot. You don't remember. Well, it doesn't matter anyway, now. I had a feeling you might try to outwit the soldiers, and come back down. Where is the girl?"

"Dead," he said without hesitation. "Something lives in the Rushes. A creature unlike any I've ever seen."

She seemed surprised. "Really?" She put her hand to her chin, pressing her thumb against her lips in thought. "It's a shame she didn't make it. She had so much promise. *He* would have taken very good care of her."

"What do you mean? You were going to kill her."

She stood up and took a few steps towards him. "We were, in the beginning. You were there, you saw what she did at the collection point. She's strong for her age and experience. It is not unheard of, but it is rare. He needs Cursed like her."

"And like you?"

She smiled again. "And like me."

"Why?"

"To hunt for the others."

"Why? Why do you kill your own kind?"

She paused at that, a hurt expression crossing her face. She started to say something, but then stopped. "It doesn't matter, Silas. My orders are to kill you on sight. I was supposed to try to

speaking with the girl, Eryn. I suppose I can't now." She looked saddened by that. "I'm sorry to be the one to do this. Believe me when I say I will carry the guilt of your death for the rest of my life."

Silas was confused by the words, but he didn't have time to question them. The Mediator raised her left hand from under her cloak, revealing a shining metal rod. At the end of the rod was an irregular white stone the size of a small fist.

Silas shouted and charged, holding his sword up in front of him, racing towards the Mediator before her power could be unleashed.

He was too slow.

White light flared from the rod and shot towards him. He could feel it coming, an intense coldness unlike anything he'd ever known. There was no time to get out of the way.

Pure instinct caused him to bring the Mediator's sword up in front of the light, to try to block it. He felt the cold of it against his hands, and he watched as the sword began to glow with the same white light, as though it was absorbing the energy. In fact, he felt resistance, like the power was pushing against the blade and the blade was pushing back. He kept fighting his way forward, his hands growing numb but the sword keeping the light from reaching the rest of him.

The Mediator creased her brow, her eyes dripping blood, the pace of the flow increasing as she concentrated, trying to force the energy from the stone past the sword.

Silas inched forward, the muscles in his arms threatening to fail. He was so tired, but somehow he held on and kept pushing against the power, growing ever closer to the Mediator.

He never had to touch her. He gave one last shove, and she broke. The energy gathered in the blade reversed, pouring back towards her in a blinding light. Her eyes went wide in fear, and then she was hit. Her frozen body fell backwards, hit the ground, and shattered. Only the rod

remained.

Silas dropped the sword and began rubbing his hands together, trying to force away the cold that had seeped in. They itched like crazy, but he knew if they itched that meant they would be okay.

It was clear the weapons the Mediators held were made of the ore *he* set so many prisoners to mine. It was obvious to him now why they needed them. To protect themselves from the power they unleashed, and to defend themselves from others with the same power.

He limped back to the bush where Eryn was stationed, and carried her down to the camp. They would be safe there for at least a day while the soldiers scoured the Rushes in search of them. They wouldn't be able to make the trip north to the sea, but that was fine with Silas.

He had a new idea on how to get into Elling.

CHAPTER TWENTY-SIX

Eryn

Eryn opened her eyes.

She was confused, looking up into the blackness so close above her, and then finding herself covered by a thick grey blanket.

"Where am I?" she whispered.

She put her hand to her forehead. She remembered being in the crevasse with Silas, and the creatures that were attacking them. Now she was here. Wherever here was.

She pushed herself to a sitting position. Her body ached from stiff and sore muscles, but she didn't complain. Looking around, she could see she was in a tent. That meant she was still alive. She wasn't bound in chains, so unless there was a guard outside the tent, that meant she hadn't been captured either.

Eryn threw off the blankets and got to her feet. Only then did she realize her clothes had been changed. Gone was the drab brown shirt and pants. It had been replaced with a long-sleeved black dress that was a little bit too long and a little bit too tight. She gasped when she saw the red eye looking out from the chest. Maybe she had been captured?

There was only one way to find out.

Her legs complained with every step, but she ignored it. She walked to the closed flap of the tent and pushed it aside. It was a bright morning, and her eyes burned while they adjusted to the light. She couldn't see anything.

"You're awake," Silas said, coming around the tent and scaring her. "It's a good thing. I was worried I would have to carry you all the way to Elling."

"Silas," she said, her voice dry.

He raised a finger and walked over to a pile of supplies he had gathered, finding a bladder of water and handing it to her. He was still wearing the same clothes she had last seen him in, although he now had a new black cloak to replace the faded old one.

She drank her fill and tried again. "I don't understand. What's going on?"

"We're leaving," he replied.

"Are we safe?"

"For now. We can talk while we ride. You do know how to ride a horse, on your own I mean?"

She smiled. He seemed to be in good spirits, and that put her at ease. "Yes. I've never ridden one as large as the chargers the soldiers use, but I have ridden."

He walked over to her and crouched so they were at eye level. "I want to apologize to you," he said. "Your clothes... they were covered in blood, and smelled awful. I tried to make you comfortable, and I have an idea."

It was obvious to her he was embarrassed. She reached out and put her hand to his face. "It's okay, Silas. I appreciate your apology, but you don't need to. I trust you."

He nodded and stood straight. "I'm sure you don't remember what happened with those creatures?" he said as he picked up the bags he had packed and brought them over to two of *his* soldiers' warhorses.

"No. I remember we were surrounded... I know I must have used my Curse."

"You did. You saved our lives." He walked one of the horses over to her. "Up you go," he

said, offering her a boost. She put her booted foot into his cupped hands and he lifted. She put her legs over the horse, finding the dress had cuts in it to make such riding possible.

"Where did the dress come from?" she asked.

He went over to the other horse and mounted, then walked it over to her.

"A Mediator," he said. He snapped the reins, and started them moving back east. "She was waiting at the camp when I brought you back here. After you saved us, I knew we couldn't make the trip north like that. I couldn't stay ahead of them and protect you. So I fooled them into thinking we were somewhere we weren't, and doubled back. I had to leave your bow and quiver back there, to fool them, but don't worry. The things that were in it are in your saddlebag."

He made a strange face when he pointed at the saddlebag. One she didn't understand.

"Did you...?"

"Kill her?" he asked. His face was grim. "Yes. I didn't have a choice. She had a white stone that she used to shoot a cold light at me. The Mediators' swords, they can absorb the power."

Eryn wasn't expecting that. How had she killed Lia, when the Mediator could have stopped it with her staff?

"She was a little bit taller than you, but almost the same size, so I changed you into her clothes. I also have a cloak for you here. This is how we're going to get into Elling."

"How?"

"The Mediator. She wanted to speak to you, and convince you to join." He smiled. "She was very convincing."

Eryn understood what he was getting at. She looked down at herself, and at the red eye on her chest. "They'll know I'm not one of them."

"Who will know? The soldiers of Elling? If you put the cloak up to cover your bald head, you'll look like any other Mediator, and I don't think anyone will have the guts to question you. You'll bring me in as your prisoner. Once we're inside, we'll disappear."

She realized that meant they would both have reached their destination. That meant they would be going their separate ways. "What about everything you were going to teach me?"

Silas looked over at her. She knew by his face he had something on his mind. He drew his lips into a tight line, and then ran his tongue around the inside of his mouth.

"Whatever you want to say, just say it, Silas," she said. "We've already been through too much together for you to hold your tongue."

"I found a ring, in your quiver," he said at last. "Where did you get it?"

She was surprised by his question. Why would he care about the ring? "I found it near Watertown. I was with Master Lewyn, our woodsman. He brought me to this rock... the Giant's Ball, he called it. It was on the ground there, partly buried. I saw the sparkle of the clear stone when the sun hit it."

He didn't look pleased with the answer. As though he had a hope for something, and she had dashed it.

"Do you know who it belongs to?" she asked.

"Yes. I gave it to Alyssa on our wedding day. I don't know how it could have come to be in the forest near your home. I can't even remember when Alyssa lost it."

She could see the pain in his eyes. How much was from the fact that his wife no longer held the ring, and how much was from the fact that he couldn't capture the memory, she didn't know. She reined the horse to a stop and slid off, then reached for the saddlebag. She flipped it open, found the coin purse, and dug out the ring.

"This belongs to you," she said, reaching up to hand it to him.

He smiled and wrapped her hand in his, and then closed her palm over it. "Keep it," he said. "Alyssa is gone to the unknown lands, and the rest of my family is lost. I know we've only been traveling together for a short time, but you're the closest thing to family I've had in years."

Eryn was touched by the gesture. "Thank you, Silas. That means more to me that you'll ever know."

"As for teaching you," he said. "If we're both going to be in Elling, I see no good reason why we should part ways. We'll be much more convincing as father and daughter."

"Grandfather," she said with a laugh. "You're too old to be my father."

He started laughing too, a deep rumble that belied his slight frame. The sound made Eryn laugh harder. She was happy to laugh again, if only for a moment.

When she got back onto her horse, she looked up at the sky. "Thank you, Amman," she said. "I will survive, and I will succeed."

CHAPTER TWENTY-SEVEN

Silas

They had reached the Elling Road, crossing the Baden to the north, closer to the city, before they ran into their first group of soldiers.

Six days had passed since they had left the Rushes. Six days of riding, walking, talking, teaching, and resting. The time had allowed their muscles to heal and the soreness to dissipate. Silas had hoped the time would also begin to restore his memories, but he found them as elusive as ever.

Once they had returned to a more populated area of Elling, Silas had insisted that Eryn shackle him with chains he had found at the soldiers' camp. He held the key tucked under his tongue, and could unlock himself at any time if need be, but playing the part of the prisoner was essential to their act, and he played it well.

So well in fact that the merchants, farmers, and artisans they passed on the road to Elling tended to either look away, or steer a wide path around the young Mediator leading the fugitive to the capital for an audience with the Overlord. So well that even *his* messengers rode past without slowing, no doubt taking notice in their minds, but not even questioning the authenticity of the scene.

His soldiers had been headed south out of the city. They were only a half days' ride out, and Silas had been expecting they would come in contact with them soon. He had done his best to prepare Eryn on how to speak and how to carry herself. He only hoped she could keep her

nerves at bay and capture the role.

"Well met, sister," the leader of the squad said, riding ahead of the six men under his command.

She had her cloak on and the hood up, covering her head. The baldness had been replaced with a light fuzz of her brown hair, but it would still have been out of place on someone of her position. She turned her face just slightly, so she could peer at the commander from the corner of her eye.

"Well met, Captain...?"

"Orozo," he said. "Captain Netan Orozo."

"Well met, Captain Orozo," she said.

The Captain looked over at Silas, following the chain from his wrists to the back of Eryn's saddle.

"So this is Silas Morningstar?" he asked.

"It is," she replied. She had practiced lowering her voice, to make herself sound older. She was holding it well.

"He looks like a used up whore," Orozo said.

"Captain," Eryn said, her voice sharp. "Is that how you speak in front of your superior? And a lady at that?"

He looked embarrassed. "Pardon me, Mediator," he said. "I've been too long in the barracks."

"I'm bringing the prisoner to the Overlord," she said. "He's proven to be very resourceful, so I would like two of your best men to escort me to the city gates."

Orozo didn't look pleased. "Mediator? You seem-"

"Are you questioning me?" she asked, interrupting him.

"No, Mediator. My apologies. Sirs Herik and Pane will ride back to Elling with you."

He spun his horse, and picked the two soldiers out of the line. "You are expected to catch up to us," he said to them. He turned back to Eryn. "We're ordered to meet with Mediator Brune outside Root. They've reported a Cursed in Killeny."

Eryn turned and looked back at Silas, her eyes betraying her character for just an instant. Silas kept his eyes down and shook his head, just enough that she would see. He understood her desire to stop them, he felt it too; but they needed to stay focused on the bigger picture.

"Mediator, are you well?" Orozo asked, noticing her movement.

She caught herself, and snapped her head back at him. "I'm fine, Captain," she said. "You are free to continue on your journey."

"Thank you, Mediator," he said. He put his fingers in his mouth and whistled, and then motioned his squad forward. All except Herik and Pane.

"Stay behind us," she told them. "Alert me immediately if he makes any sudden moves."

"Yes, Mediator," they said as one, slipping in behind them.

Silas fought against his smile. He hadn't coached her on this, but she had played them perfectly. She was believable enough as a Mediator who had captured the infamous Silas Morningstar. She was unquestionable with a pair of soldiers helping to escort her.

They reached Elling as the sun began to set on their left, and a large patch of heavy clouds began to move in. Silas kept a close eye on Eryn as they crested the horizon and the city

came into view. He was curious to see her reaction, knowing she had never laid eyes on anything of its like before.

He wasn't disappointed. As soon as they had gotten close enough that the twenty foot wall surrounding the main city was visible behind the overgrowth of smaller shops and apartments that ringed it, and the twin two hundred foot tall towers of the Overlord's palace could be seen rising into the darkening sky, Eryn's whole body stiffened in the saddle. He caught a glimpse of her wide eyes when she had started to turn her head back to him, to exclaim her amazement at the very suggestion of so many people living in such a small area, until she had remembered their escort, and put her head back forward.

Moving closer, they could see the varying heights of the many stone and wood buildings, tightly packed together inside the walls, rising and falling with the uneven lay of the land. Moving closer still, they began to be able to make out people going up and down the roads that criss-crossed the hills, moving this way and that as they went about their business.

They rode into the outer city, where the roads were still dirt and the buildings more haphazard. Silas knew this to be the poorest area of Elling, home mostly to displaced villagers, the disabled, and the infirm. There was a Temple of Amman abutting the city walls, a simple square wooden structure with a wide open archway and a menagerie of prayer rugs arranged along the floors. A priest of Amman stood outside, blessing people as they passed, and handing out small loaves of bread.

The sound of a blacksmith hammer rang out to their right, and Silas wondered what Eryn was feeling at hearing a sound he knew would be familiar to her. During their journey to Elling they had spoken at length on her childhood, and her family. She had confided to him how much she missed them, and how she prayed to Amman for them every day before she went to sleep. He

promised himself he would bring her to the Temple to offer her prayers in the home of Amman, and help her feel closer to those she had lost. He didn't share her belief in the god, but he accepted her need for it.

"Sir Herik, Sir Pane," Eryn said, spinning her horse around and addressing both of them. "You have done me a great service. I will be sure the Overlord hears of it."

The two soldiers bowed their heads, turned and began the long ride back to the rest of their squad. Eryn caught Silas' eye and winked at him. He winked back.

"Good evening, Mediator," the guard standing before the city gates said when she approached. Like Root, there were numerous guards stationed at the entrance, along with tax collectors. The city was too large to take the names of all who entered, but they did extract a small fee from the merchants who desired access.

Eryn was about to respond, when he noticed Silas behind her.

"You captured him?" he asked, clearly surprised.

"Why so shocked, soldier?" Eryn replied. "He is an old man."

The guard walked back to where Silas was. "Good riddance, murderer," he said.

He got too close, and Silas' feet weren't bound. He kicked out, catching the guard in the face and knocking him to the ground.

Eryn grabbed the chain and yanked on it, pulling him off-balance. He caught himself with his legs.

The guard picked himself up, his nose bloodied. "You son of a wh-"

"Soldier," Eryn snapped. "You should learn from your mistake. You were a fool to get so close to him."

He swallowed his anger and bowed. "Yes, Mediator."

Eryn urged her horse forward through the city gates, trailing Silas behind. He spit on the guard for good measure, enjoying his part in the act.

They rode through the main thoroughfare, a wide, crowded street that wound its way around and up the hill directly to the Overlord's palace. The populace around them moved aside without looking, keeping their attention on their own tasks and ignoring the presence of the Mediator and her prisoner. Silas was sure they had seen a similar scene play out enough times that the novelty had worn off.

In fact, he had been counting on it. He kept a close eye on the people around them as they walked up and around. When he thought nobody was looking, he bent over and spit the key to the shackles down into his hand, and then maneuvered himself to unlock it. He gave the chain one more tug to alert Eryn that he had freed himself, and then he slid off and ran.

"Mediator!" someone cried out on the street, almost as soon as Silas' feet hit the ground. He turned his head back and saw Eryn was already wheeling her horse to follow after him.

It had all been part of their plan, but it was still a bit of a risk, because he had no idea how the people of Elling would respond to his escape. He pushed past a young man in a fancy blue tunic, and made his way down one of the many narrow alleys between buildings. He could hear Eryn's horse clomping behind him.

He burst out of that alley onto a smaller street where the smell of fresh cooked meats caught the attention of his senses. He saw it had also attracted two of *his* soldiers, and they noticed the commotion he caused as he passed through to the next alley.

"Go around," he heard Eryn shout from behind him. The order wasn't very specific, so he hoped it would be enough to keep them from participating in the show.

He burst out of that alley, and found himself on a downward slope. He could see the

buildings ahead, older and more worn, and cast in deeper shadows. Eryn had told him about Magret and Tanner, and how they had suggested the Tenders. He was headed in the right direction.

A soldier popped out in front of him. Silas caught him from the corner of his eye just in time to duck under the man's sword. He brought his elbow up into the soldier's face, knocking him away, leaped to the side to avoid hitting a woman with a baby, and reached yet another narrow passage. He could still hear Eryn chasing after him.

The whole city had changed by the time he reached the bottom of the hill. The buildings here were darker, and older, but the streets were less crowded. Those that were outside had none of the finery he had bypassed on the hill, their clothes a more simple brown, grey, and black cloth. They were a step above those that lived outside the walls, but only a step.

He had crossed three more streets, and was nearly ready to end the chase, when the door of one of the apartment buildings swung open, and a thick arm and body grabbed him and pulled him inside.

"What in He-"

The force made him tumble to the ground. He found himself on his rear, resting on a worn wooden floor.

"Shhh." The man who had pulled him in was holding a finger to his lips. On the other side of the door was a second man, smaller and thinner, watching from a crack.

"What are you doing?" Silas whispered. This definitely hadn't been part of the plan.

"We see you coming," the big man replied in a low voice. "We're ready for that Mediator."

Silas felt his breath catch. "What? No!"

He heard the horse coming, more slowly now because he had disappeared. It sounded like it was right outside the door.

"Now!" the small man shouted, swinging open the door. They both ran out at Eryn, and from the noise Silas could tell they weren't alone.

He jumped to his feet and ran after them, hearing her scream at their attack. When he reached the door, he saw the big man trying to pull her off the horse.

"Stop," Silas shouted. "Stop." He grabbed the man's shoulder, trying to pull him away, but he wrapped his hand around Eryn's leg.

"Silas," Eryn cried.

There were at least six of them, all trying to get her down to their level.

"Leave her alone," Silas yelled. He stopped trying to be diplomatic, and punched the big man in the head.

"What you do that for?" he asked, turning to face Silas, reacting as though he barely felt the blow.

"Let her go," Silas said. "She's with me. She isn't a Mediator."

"Huh?"

Silas reached out and grabbed her, pulling her from the saddle and away from her attackers. There were seven all told, five men and two women. They held knives and clubs, and they looked angry.

"She isn't a Mediator," he repeated, loud enough for the others to hear. He pulled back the hood of her cloak, revealing her almost bald head. The action gave the rest of the crowd pause.

"Well, I'll be," the small man said. "Who are you?"

Silas held up his hand. "Not yet," he said. "We need to get out of here. The real soldiers

probably aren't that far behind."

He let Eryn go and grabbed his sword and the saddlebags from the horse, and then led it back the other direction and sent it on its way.

"Do you have somewhere safe we can go?"

The big man waved. "This way."

CHAPTER TWENTY-EIGHT

Eryn

Eryn and Silas followed them down a dark alley and around a corner to a pair of large red doors. The big man knocked on it twice, paused, and knocked twice more. Eryn could hear the sound of someone shifting a huge crossbar out of the way, and then the door swung open.

"Bryant," the doorman said on seeing the big man. He scanned the group, his eyes stopping on Eryn and going wide with fear. "What are you doing?"

"Is okay, Alain," Bryant said. "She's in disguise."

Alain moved out of the way, and ushered them in. He was an ordinary looking man, with short brown hair, a large nose, and crooked teeth. He bowed to Eryn when she walked by.

"Save it for later, Alain," the small man said.

"Shove off, Edgar," Alain replied.

Beyond the red door was a large, dark room, lit by candles placed into a row of dusty old chandeliers that hung from a wood-paneled ceiling. The floor was marble, but had seen better days, and the mural painted walls were pitted and cracked. To the rear of the room was a fireplace, and scattered around in no particular order were straw beds, next to which lay assortments of personal items. Eryn saw a staircase on either side of the fireplace, each going in opposite directions.

"Where is this?" Silas asked, joining her in scanning their surroundings.

"Is home," Bryant said. "Not much, but is better than being out in rain."

A sudden rumble shook the building, the dark clouds they had seen earlier finally unleashing their payload.

"It used to be a theatre," Edgar said. "The stairs up led to the seating and the stage. The stairs down to the wardrobe and prop rooms. This room was for banquets and dancing."

"There was a fire one night," Alain said. "The Overlord refused to let us rebuild. He claimed our shows were spreading discord among the citizenry. That we were anti-empire. He shut us down. We've been living here, destitute, since."

"You're performers?" Eryn asked.

Edgar chuckled. "Yes, my dear. The Tilling Theatre Troupe, once the pride of the Tenders, now just a leaky roof to hide under." He turned to Silas. "You must be Silas Morningstar?"

Silas nodded.

Edgar gave him a theatrical bow. "A pleasure," he said. "We were told to keep an eye out for you here."

"You were?" Silas asked.

Edgar reached into his pocket and pulled out a crumpled up piece of paper. He handed it to Silas. Eryn positioned herself over his shoulder so she could read it with him.

Edgar,

His soldiers are searching for a man with white hair and blue eyes named Silas Morningstar. He is headed to Elling, and may be traveling with a young girl. The Overlord is afraid of him, and he helped Sena and me, so please keep a look out, and help him when he arrives. For all our sakes.

- *Robar Quall*

"You entertainers are a sly bunch," Silas said.

Edgar turned to her. "My apologies to you, miss. When we saw Silas being chased by a Mediator, and didn't see a young girl..."

"You don't need to apologize," Eryn said. "It was a little scary, but I've been through worse."

"I'm glad you weren't harmed in the confusion," Edgar said. "Although, we did think it was odd that a Mediator would be trying to catch someone like Silas on their own. Mediators aren't soldiers."

Eryn wasn't sure what he meant, until she remembered that most people outside of *his* army didn't know their secret. She considered telling him, but there was a time and a place, and she wasn't sure this was it. "No, but it was an important part of the plan."

Edgar laughed and clapped his hands twice. The rest of the assembled performers lined up behind him.

"You already know Bryant, and Alain," he said, sweeping his hand towards them. They bowed in response. Next, he pointed to the two women, both with long black hair and thick, curvy bodies. "That is Canae, and her sister Lanae." The two women curtsied. He motioned to a man who was taller and thinner than Silas. "That's Winslow." He waved at a handsome man with shoulder length blonde hair and a sharp nose. "Galvan."

"And I'm Morie," the last one said, stepping forward from behind Galvan. He was the shortest person Eryn had ever seen, standing no higher than her waist. "Every theater needs a dwarf."

"A pleasure to meet you all," Eryn said.

"Edgar," Silas said. "It isn't safe for us to be here. It's only a matter of time before the soldiers figure out that we tricked them. The Overlord will stop at nothing to catch me, once he knows I'm in the city."

"This is a theater, Silas," Edgar said. "There is no better place in Elling to hide, and there are no better people to hide with." He leaned in close and whispered. "If you don't mind my asking, why exactly does the Overlord fear you so?"

Silas shrugged. "I wish I knew. I've come to Elling to find out."

"Well, a friend of Robar Quall is a friend of ours, and an enemy of the Overlord is a best friend of ours. Talk to Canae or Lanae when you need to go out into the street. They are experts with makeup and wigs. Nobody will know that it's you. For now, please, make yourselves at home. Alain was just downstairs preparing dinner before you arrived, so there will be stew soon."

Edgar bowed to both of them, and took his leave, wandering off to check on the water that was now dripping in through the ceiling. Eryn could see why their beds were arranged in such a random order. It wasn't for space, it was to avoid the leaks.

"Is kind of out of rain," Bryant said with a laugh. "I get some straw from downstairs, make you at home. Rain is good timing, it help you avoid drips."

Silas came over to her, his face serious.

"What's wrong?" she asked.

"I don't like the idea of putting these people at risk. The Overlord will know I'm here by the end of the day, and he'll empty the barracks to find me."

"Edgar sounded confident that they could hide you," she said. "I think this is a blessing

from Amman, Silas. We had no plan for where we would stay once we were in the city. At least this way we have people willing to help us hide, or give us a disguise. It's their choice. They know the risk."

Silas gave her a warm smile. "I can't say I'm not fond of the idea of a nice hot bowl of stew."

Bryant returned from the basement a few minutes later, cradling bales of straw in both of his large arms. He found some open space against the wall, where there was a large enough dry spot, and dropped the bales. He worked fast, molding the straw into two sleeping areas.

"You can keep things here," he said, once he was done. "No one will take."

Eryn was certain that was true. They were all in this together, and they were willing to put themselves at risk for the two of them. It wasn't the family she had expected to have, but she appreciated them all the same.

The soldiers arrived the next morning, led by a man who called himself Constable Latten. He was a handsome man with a muscular physique, short red hair and a strong jaw. He carried himself with confidence and purpose, and it was obvious from the moment Alain opened the door to the theater to let them in, he was looking for any reason at all to burn the place down.

"My Lord, we haven't seen them," Edgar insisted. "We would know if we had, with all the rain last night."

They were standing in the ballroom. Edgar, Alain, Bryant, Constable Latten, and six of *his* soldiers. Eryn could see them through the smoke from their hiding spot in the fireplace, a

secret small alcove that kept them invisible through a lit fire. She had thought Edgar was crazy when he had told them to hide back there, but now she believed he was brilliant.

"My men reported that they followed Silas and a Mediator through the streets of Elling, to this block of buildings. They came upon a lone charger returning from the street two blocks from this one, and we are now quite sure that the Mediator they saw was no Mediator at all. Your sympathies for fugitives, rebels, and scum is well known. In fact, the Overlord shut down your so-called theater for your subversive content. The only reason you and your troop haven't been shipped off to the ore mines is because you are the brother of Lord Tilling. Yet, you expect me to believe that you don't have Morningstar and the Cursed hiding here?"

She was impressed with Edgar. He didn't react to hearing she was Cursed, even though they had never mentioned it to him.

"My Lord," he said. "I have rejected the accusations made against me regarding the nature of my plays time and again. What the Overlord holds as his opinion is only that. I am a loyal citizen of *his* empire today, tomorrow, and always. Now, you are free to examine every square inch of what is left of this once fine establishment as you desire. I assure you that you won't find any trace of the fugitives."

Constable Latten turned to his men. "You two, upstairs. You two, downstairs. You two, with me."

The soldiers split up. Eryn watched the two pairs approach, holding her breath and praying that they wouldn't be able to see them once they got close. They passed right by, headed in opposite directions on the stairs.

"Search their things," Latten commanded his men, pointing at Bryant's bed and personal effects.

The two soldiers went over and began tearing apart the straw, throwing it everywhere while Bryant looked on, his face a mask, hiding the anger that Eryn could see behind his eyes. He had a small barrel where he kept his clothing and personal treasures, and they turned it over and threw all of those things everywhere as well.

"My Lord, is this necessary?" Edgar asked, following behind Latten.

The Constable turned and smiled. "No," he said. "I don't expect to find them, or any hint of them. To be honest, I'm not convinced that they are here."

"As I said."

Latten held up his hand. "Even if they are not. I *am* convinced you know where they are, and that you helped them find somewhere else to hide."

Edgar maintained his composure. The soldiers moved on to Winslow's bed. Eryn heard crashing now from downstairs too, and Winslow complaining at the mess those soldiers were making.

"My Lord-"

Latten raised his hand again. "Edgar, enough. You have some protection from your brother, but it will only extend so far, for so long, especially where Morningstar is concerned."

Edgar remained silent after that, while the soldiers ransacked the troupe's meager possessions. Eryn felt guilty for putting them in that position, and she knew Silas did too.

They waited for an hour after Latten and the soldiers had left, to receive the signal from the spotters across the city. It had been an interesting conversation that Silas had held with Edgar, about how they had known where he was, and when he was there. There was an entire network of people living in Elling who did their best to interfere with *his* soldiers at any available opportunity. Many spent their days crouched on the rooftops, tracking the movements

of the soldiers and sending signals to one another by reflecting light when the sun was out, or lighting candles when it wasn't.

"I'm sorry," Eryn said to Edgar, once they had come out from behind the fireplace.

Edgar smiled. "It is of little concern. Even if you had never come here, the result would have been the same. We certainly couldn't prevent you from entering the city, and wouldn't ask you to leave."

"The Constable said your brother was the Lord of Tilling? Where is that?"

"If you take a boat from Elling, north across the lake and up the river to the sea, that is where you will find Tilling. It is a beautiful place, and the sight of the ocean is one I miss nearly every day."

Eryn was confused. "So why are you here?"

"That is a long story, my dear. Suffice it to say, my brother prefers me alive, but at a distance."

CHAPTER TWENTY-NINE

Eryn

"Hold still for one more second, dear," Canae said, taking a horse hair brush and using it to spread some moist goop around Eryn's hairline. She then pulled a little bit harder on the wig of blonde hair she had spent the last three weeks sewing, and pushed it against the goop. "Now, you'll need to keep this dry, or the glue will soften up and the wig will fall off. We don't want that to happen, do we?"

"No," Eryn said. "We definitely do not want that to happen."

Almost a two months had passed since they had arrived in Elling, and taken up residence with the Tilling Theater Troupe.

The first week had been a tense time for all of them, with Letten and his men coming by every day to ransack the place and search for Silas. When they hadn't turned him up, he had sworn to Edgar that he would find him, and when he did he would know if Edgar had been involved or not. In a fit of angry frustration, he had promised that when that time came, he would finish the job the first fire had started, and he would make sure the doors were barred closed with all of them inside.

By the third week, Letten only came two or three times. They knew to expect him by now, and had gone as far as to keep their belongings in a state of disarray, so the soldiers had little to do but walk in and walk out.

This week, he hadn't come at all.

Eryn had enjoyed the time more than she had believed she could, and she found joy in the company provided by the troupe. They lived on the meager earnings they could gather doing impromptu performances, tricks, or jokes in the busier, wealthier streets of the city center, and shared everything they had with one another, without question. It was this openness, honesty, and togetherness that had helped her feel so at home. The troupe was like her village, but on an even smaller scale.

Her family had never been forgotten, and in quieter times she felt guilty for enjoying herself as much as she did with her new family. She still cried for their loss from time to time, but she always kept her mother's words in her mind. *Survive*.

She did worry about Silas though. He had been unhappy when Edgar suggested they remain in the theater until Letten had stopped making appearances. He was eager to find the Overlord, to see his face in hopes that he would remember more of his past. The Overlord's letter had suggested that time would help him regain himself, and while he had reclaimed some of who he once was, it hadn't improved his memory. It had improved his skill with a sword, if that could be believed.

Stuck inside, Eryn had been at Silas' disposal, and he took on the role of her teacher with total purpose. Not that she would ever complain, despite the soreness in her arms and legs by the end of the day, or the seeming pointlessness of some of the exercises he forced her through. Looking back these weeks later, her body was stronger than it had ever been, as was her mind.

In the beginning, he would teach her for four hours every day, and she would be so exhausted she would fall onto her straw and sleep for the next four. Now, she would continue practicing on her own after their lesson, going through the moves he had taught her again and again until he would glance over and tell her it was perfect.

"My brother was in *his* army," Galvan had told her once, when she was sitting on her bed watching Silas strengthening his body through a series of strange stretches and poses. "I don't know what he's doing, or where he learned to fight, but it wasn't from being a soldier."

Eryn had found the statement peculiar, and she had asked Silas about it later. He had been as confused as she was, telling her he was simply doing what his mind and body was telling him it wanted to do. All of the techniques were in his muscles already, he had said. He was just reintroducing them after a long hibernation.

The weeks had given her time to practice calling on her Curse as well. She only did so when she could sneak away to the burned out upper floor of the theater, which she had discovered held half a roof collapsed at the north end, the splinters of which mingled with stacked benches that were mostly turned into black, charred logs of wood, and at the bottom a large stage. It was the stage that had survived the worst of the damage. It was still partially covered by the roof, and it stayed somewhat dry in the rain, so that was where she would stand.

She would close her eyes and focus on her breathing. She discovered that the power from her Curse always came easiest if she brought herself back to her father's forge, and concentrated on the rhythm and the sound of the bellows stoking the fires. She would feel the tingle between her ears, and if she concentrated well enough she found she could direct it throughout her body. The question she had been increasingly asking herself was, now what?

It was one thing to draw in the power and activate it. Once she held it, she didn't know what to do with it. She was afraid to bring the blue stone to the stage with her, for fear she would burn down the theater, or attract unwanted attention.

She had tried a few times to slow down time, or speed herself up, or whatever it was Silas had told her she had done, but all she had ever accomplished was to make herself vomit. She

could do small things pretty well, like unlock doors, or create a small force of air, or enlarge the strength of an existing fire in the fireplace. They were nice tricks, but she knew they would never be enough to help her confront *him*. She had managed to do incredible things when her emotions ran high, but she had no memory of it, and she had no ability to intentionally create the same effect.

There was something else. Something that scared her more than she wanted to admit. Using too much power had caused her to pass out in the past. Practicing too much with it in a single day gave her a massive headache, and there was one time she could have sworn she had seen a grey scale on the back of her arm. She had blinked, and it had been gone, but it had reminded her of Malik and his journal. She hadn't tried to use the Curse for days after.

"I wonder if Lanae is finished with Silas yet," Canae said. She reached over to the dressing table in front of them and picked up a hand mirror, holding it so Eryn could see herself.

If she hadn't known it was her, she wouldn't have known it was her. Her hair had reached a boyish length, but it was still too obvious to be seen on a girl. Her face had thinned a little from the hard exercise and light meals the troupe shared, but she thought it looked more adult, especially with the long blonde hair Canae had just finished gluing to her. A few well-placed bits of putty widened her nose and lengthened her chin, and thick makeup put it all together seamlessly. She didn't think she looked like an attractive woman, but she did think she looked like a woman, not a girl.

"You are amazing," she said to Canae.

"Thank you, dear. Remember, don't get it wet."

Eryn pushed herself out of the chair. There was one main wardrobe area underneath the theater, with separate dressing rooms for the men and the women. It was filled with all kinds of

clothes, as well as any small prop that could be imagined; from a dull longsword to a heavy metal throne. A pair of staircases twisted around a wooden pole on either end of the space, leading directly up to the stage above.

Eryn went over to the men's dressing room and knocked on the door. "Silas, are you ready?"

"He'll be right there," Lanae said. "I'm just finishing his nose."

Eryn smiled and walked over to the wardrobe mirror to look at herself in full. Canae had put her in a simple, long-sleeved green dress that fell to her knees, and a pair of not-very-comfortable matching green slippers. She had also forced her to wear a special undergarment she had devised, mounted with a lot of extra padding around the chest. Eryn put her hands up to it and shifted it, trying to get it into position to look somewhat natural. It felt weird to her to have such a large protrusion there.

"Don't worry," Silas said from behind her. How had he opened the door so quietly? "If anyone comes at you with a knife, you can use those to defend yourself."

Eryn felt her face turn red, and she turned around to playfully scold him. "Silas?" She couldn't believe it was him.

He spread his arms wide. "How do I look?" he asked.

Lanae had dyed his hair to a soft brown, and tied it behind his head in a ponytail. She had made his nose wider to match Eryn's, and put makeup all over his face to hide the weather lines and wrinkles. She had dressed him a white cotton shirt with a rich brown leather jerkin over it, and finished it off with loose black leather pants that tucked into tall black boots.

"You look like you could be my father, instead of my grandfather," she replied, laughing in amazement at the sight of him. "I'd never know it was you."

"I do have to stay out of the rain," he said. "It will wash the makeup and the dye out."

"The putty will fall off too," Lanae said. "That goes for sweating as well, so try to stay out of trouble."

"Trouble?" Silas asked. "Me?"

Lanae started laughing, and she slapped him on the shoulder. The sisters had taken a strong liking to Silas, both for having risked his life to help Robar and Sena, and for his continued devotion to his lost love. He had told Eryn more than once how those were the memories that he missed more than any of the others.

"Are we ready to go then, Eryn?" he asked.

She nodded. Today was the first day Edgar hadn't told them they should remain inside, and they were both eager to move ahead with their plans. They would be going to the Elling library first, so that Eryn could begin learning of the history of the Empire, and after that they would seek out the Overlord. Alain had told them there was a public hanging scheduled for this evening; a soldier who had tried to abandon *his* army.

They climbed the stairs up to the ballroom, where Edgar and Bryant were working to patch some of the leaks in the ceiling. Eryn had given them most of the coin she had in her purse, both to repay them for their hospitality, and in the spirit of their troupe's communal arrangement. Edgar had resisted until the end, but she had found an ally in Morie, who had taken her coin one by one and snuck it into the pool. Of all the entertainers, the dwarf was her favorite. He had a quick wit, and a playful humor that reminded her of Roddin.

Edgar saw them coming. "Bryant, come down for a moment," he said. The big man climbed down the ladder so Edgar wouldn't have to hold it steady. "You're off then?"

"Yes," Silas said. "Is it safe?"

Edgar dug into his pocket, and removed a metal disc like the one Roque had given to Penticott. According to his tale, he had taken a set from his brother. There was a spotter on one of the nearby rooftops who had its twin. He squeezed it a few times. A moment later, it vibrated in his hand.

"It's safe," he said. "The nearest soldiers are three blocks east. Go north two blocks before you cut over towards the library."

"Be careful," Bryant said. He looked at Eryn. "Green is good color for you."

She felt her face flush a little at the compliment. "Thank you, Bryant."

Alain opened the door as they approached, and bowed to them. "Good hunting," he said.

It hurt Eryn's eyes to be outside. They had spent so much time holed up in the theater, which was lit only by candles and the fireplace, that her eyes weren't accustomed to the brightness. She hadn't realized until that moment how much she had missed it.

"I like them," Eryn said. "But I don't think I could live that way forever."

Silas nodded. "If I had to be in there another week I might have killed someone. The Elling library is near the city center, about halfway up the hill to the Palace. It's free for *his* nobles, but like everything else, if you're a commoner, you have to pay a tax." He patted his pants, and she heard the jingle of coin.

"What do you think *he* does with the tax money *he* collects?"

"It's expensive to run an empire, and he has a large army to pay for. If what Edgar tells me is true, *he's* going to need it."

"What did Edgar tell you?"

They reached the second block north, and turned west. Eryn could see the street begin to slope up, and the two tall towers of the Palace were easy to spy from there. She wondered if

anyone ever went up to the top of them, and if they did, why they never saw the spotters on the rooftops. Maybe it was up too high.

"More unrest, more Cursed. Entertainers travel further and more often than any other profession. They send a lot of information through one another, about what is happening in the Empire. Robar said he wasn't big on politics, but that didn't mean he didn't know what was going on."

"Do you think there will be war?"

"Eventually, yes. Something has changed in the Empire. I don't know what it is. I can't put my finger on it. It's there, waiting below the surface. Waiting for something."

She wasn't sure what he meant, but she didn't ask. The further west they walked, the more crowded the streets became. They had to be careful what they spoke of.

"Eddard, look," she said when she saw the poster. Eddard was the alias Silas had chosen for himself. Eryn had been given the name Farah, a suggestion from Morie.

The poster was an almost accurate drawing of Silas, with a notice of a reward for his body. It was nailed to side of a tavern at a busy intersection near the city center.

He looked at it, and then looked around, as though he had studied it so he could find the killer and claim the reward. Then he took her hand and led her north. The road wound upwards around the hill, and she could see the Palace wasn't that far away.

"There it is," Silas said as the reached the end of the turn. He was pointing at a white stone building with two large wooden doors and a dome rising from the center.

Eryn was expecting it to be bigger. "It's so small," she said.

"I expect there are a lot of things *he* doesn't want *his* people to read. I don't know if you'll find what you're looking for in there, but you have to see it for yourself."

She stared at the library for a minute more. "Maybe it is small, but that doesn't mean that the answers I seek aren't waiting inside."

There was a guard at the door, a soldier. Eryn was a little bit nervous approaching him, but Silas seemed confident enough in their disguises.

"How much is the tax these days?" Silas asked.

"Two copper," the guard replied, holding out his hand.

Silas reached into his pocket and pulled out a few coins. He found the two small orange ones, and handed them over. They moved to enter, but he stepped in front of the door. Eryn felt her heart lurch at the motion. Had he recognized them?

"Each," the guard said.

Silas chuckled, and dug around until he found two more of the coins. Once he had given them over, the guard moved out of the way.

The library may have been small, but it was impressive. The dome in the center was ringed with windows, and light filtered in at the perfect angle to illuminate rows of books stacked neatly on burnished wooden shelves, encircling a common area with tables and chairs where all manner of people read through them. Some wrote notes with paper and quill of their own, and others simply examined the texts.

It was the smell of the paper that captured her. It was a musty but clean smell, the smell of knowledge and information. She looked at all of the books, and then turned to Silas.

"Where do I start?" she asked.

"History, I suppose," Silas said.

They moved through the rows of books together, until they found one aptly titled, 'The History of the Empire'. Eryn pulled it off the shelf, and they retired to one of the tables.

She could barely contain her excitement when she flipped open the leather bound cover of the thick tome. As deep as the book was, it had to contain what she sought.

She turned to the first page. It began with a description of the Empire, the thirty provinces, and each of their names. On the second page was a map. On the third page, the book began listing each of the Overlords of each of the provinces, from the first to the last as of the time the book was scribed. She raced through the pages, searching for something about *him*, something about *his* role in creating the Empire, and about how *he* had come to power. What had they been before *him*?

She reached the end of the book with a sigh that was loud enough to draw looks. 'The History of the Empire' didn't contain a single word about its ruler.

"Let me see if there is another," she said, getting up and returning to the shelves.

She scanned each title. 'Famous Battles of the Empire' looked promising, but when she pulled it down and scanned through it, she found it only contained histories of uprisings in each of the province, and how the great and powerful armies of the Empire defeated them, usually in a matter of days.

"What about a history of the Cursed?" she whispered. "Or a history of the Mediators? What about anything that explains the need for the ore mines, or why nobody knows who *he* is, where *his* home is, or how *he* came into *his* rule?"

She was getting angry enough to scream, so she put her latest title back on the shelf and returned to where Silas was sitting, watching the other patrons.

"There's nothing," she said. She couldn't hide the anger in her voice.

"Not nothing," Silas replied.

He made a subtle gesture to a man standing near one of the shelves. He was an older man,

bald on the top of his head with a ring of grey hair around it. He wore a simple long tunic cinched at the waist with a gilded rope, and he had a framed piece of glass resting in front of his right eye.

"He was very interested in what you were reading, and your reaction. I think we should go talk to him."

The man glanced their way, saw them looking, and nervously turned his head and shuffled over behind one of the rows so they couldn't see him. Silas stood up and they walked over to where he was.

"Good day, my friend," Silas said. "I couldn't help but notice the interest you were taking in my daughter."

He looked embarrassed at that, and he stammered out a reply. "No. Not... Not your daughter." He lowered his voice. "The books. The titles." His eyes danced between them, and settled on Silas. "Did you know a man named Aren Rast?"

CHAPTER THIRTY

Silas

Rast? The name was unfamiliar, but not without meaning. He had heard it before. He had claimed it in the past.

Silas could feel all of the blood drain from his face. It took everything in him to resist the urge to grab the man in front of him by the neck, and demand to know what he knew.

Instead, he glanced over at Eryn, and then back at the man. "It may be that we do. How do you know Aren?"

The man shook his head. "Not here," he said. "Come with me."

He led them to the east corner of the library, where there was a door. The door led down into a basement underneath the building. There was a large room where a dozen men leaned over books, reading from one and writing to another, their only light that of an oil lamp that hung close above their heads.

"This is where we scribe copies of the more popular texts," he said, leading them through the room. Nobody looked up.

Behind that was a short hallway, with a door on either side. The man took out a key, and unlocked the one on the left, pushing it open.

"This is where we burn the books they find that *he* doesn't approve of," he said. "Did you know *he* has people whose sole purpose is to track down such books?" The room had an oven in it, not currently lit. The walls were covered in ash. He closed the door and turned to the one on

the right.

"This is my office," he said, unlocking it, opening the door, and entering. "Please, come in."

They filed in. The office was a simple affair, with a plain desk in the center, a stool, and hastily piled stacks of books behind it.

"My name is Markus," he said, closing the door behind them. "I'm the librarian."

"Markus," Silas said, "How did you know my son?"

Markus' eyes lifted, and his mouth opened. "You? You're supposed to be dead."

He made a move for the door. Before he had taken two steps, Silas produced a knife from his boot, and put it to the librarian's throat.

"Not a sound," he said. He held him for a tense moment. "Blink your eyes if I can let you go without you calling for help. I didn't come here to hurt you."

It took a few seconds, but Markus blinked his eyes.

Silas let him go.

"I do... do... don't understand," Markus said. "Why would you come to me, after all this time? After what you did to him?"

Murderer.

Silas fought against himself. "You know about that?"

"Of course I know," he said. "I know all about you. Talon Rast, General of the Northern Armies. So loyal to *him*, that you ordered the death of your own son."

He spat in Silas' face.

Silas could feel Eryn tense beside him, and she started to move forward to restrain the man. He put his hand up in front of her, causing her to stop. He closed his eyes, and let the spittle

slide down his cheek. He tried to remember. General Talon Rast? He knew he had commanded men, but not his rank. Not even his real name. Not until now.

He opened his eyes, and slowly wiped away the spit.

"I deserve that and more," he said to Markus. "Although that name is no longer familiar to me. These days, I go by Silas Morningstar."

Markus looked confused. "The fugitive the Overlord is searching for?"

"The same. Whatever I was before, everything is different now. Please, Markus, tell me who you are, and how you knew Aren. Your anger is too violent to be anything but personal."

He could tell that Markus had expected to die. He stood shivering in front of them, his eyes defiant. At Silas' words, he began to cry.

"My daughter's name was Kaelyn," he said. "She was Aren's wife." He looked up at Silas, their eyes meeting. "The soldiers killed her, and their unborn child."

Murderer.

Silas' jaw tightened on its own. He had killed this man's daughter, his son's wife? He couldn't even remember when Aren had gotten married. Unborn child? It wasn't possible. Aren was Cursed.

He bowed his head to the man. "I'm sorry, Markus. For all of the pain I have cause you and your wife. For every day you have woken in anger and sorrow for the loss of your child, and your grandchild. I won't ask for your forgiveness, nor do I expect it, however; I have sworn to protect those who I have wronged, and I need to know whatever you can tell me about Aren, and about myself."

It was clear Markus didn't know how to react. "I... I... I don't understand."

"Markus," Eryn said, stepping forward. "We need to know what you know. Silas he... he

has no memory. We believe *he* may have taken it. Or the Overlord may have taken it. We need to find out why."

"Taken it? How can someone take a memory?"

Silas got to his feet, tears in his eyes. "What do you know about the Cursed?"

"I know that *he* hunts them," Markus said. "I... I know other things too. The Mediators are Cursed. Aren told me that. He figured it out. He learned things. He said never to tell anyone, or they would come for me."

"Do you know about their power?" Eryn asked.

"Power? To try to talk the Cursed into coming with them? I know they promise to help them, and take care of them. It is all lies to get them to come quietly. I don't think they want to kill their families. Not always."

"No, their real power," Eryn said.

Markus shook his head. "No, I... Aren knew more, but he wouldn't tell me. He said it wasn't safe for me to know."

"The Cursed have the power to make someone forget. Or make someone drink to forget," Eryn said.

"I've never heard anything like that," Markus replied.

Silas watched Eryn close her eyes. He watched the rise and fall of her chest as her breathing evened out. "Opire," she whispered. The door swung back open.

Markus turned white again, while Silas pushed the door closed. "You're Cursed," he said to Eryn. A small run of blood was pooling below her eye.

"The Mediators are also Cursed," Silas said. "They come to speak to the Cursed. They determine if their power is strong enough to try to enlist them or to just kill them." He

remembered the black haired Mediator he had killed. "You are right that they don't always seem happy about it."

"Why? How? It... It doesn't make sense."

"We don't know," Eryn said. "We're trying to find out."

"Markus, are you sure your daughter was with child?" Silas asked.

Markus nodded.

"Are you sure it was Aren's child?"

"What are you suggesting?" he asked, his face turning red.

Silas put up his hand. "Aren was Cursed. The Cursed cannot have children."

"She was with no other, I would swear my life on it. She loved your son more than anything."

Silas decided not to push. "You saw Eryn looking at the history books. That was when you asked us if we knew Aren. Why?"

Markus went over and sat on his stool. "I met your boy when he was sixteen," he said. "From what I know, he had just left home. He came to the library, and asked me if he could apprentice with me. He said he loved books, and learning. He was so enthusiastic. He reminded me of myself at his age. I took him on."

"Everything went well for the first four months. He even started courting my daughter. I was so happy at the prospect. They were married two months later."

"Was I there?" Silas asked.

"No. Your wife, I'm sorry but I don't remember her name."

"Alyssa."

"Alyssa was there. She said you were off in Neder, and wouldn't be back for some time."

She gave your son her wedding ring, to give to Kaelyn. She said you would never notice it was gone."

Silas tried to remember, to picture himself in the northern province, across the Small Sea. He came up empty. At least now he knew how the ring had gotten into Aren's hands.

"Then, soon after that, he came to me and started asking me questions about history. About *him*. About the books we were supposed to burn, and if I had ever read any of them. I told him that it wasn't permitted, and besides most of the books weren't written in our alphabet. He confessed to me that he had taken one. He said it was in an old language, and he was still trying to figure out what it meant, but it had made him begin to question why everything is the way it is."

"Books in another alphabet?" Eryn asked.

"Yes. *He* insists that we burn any book that came before *his* rule, under penalty of hanging. The Overlord says that such books are dangerous, and *he* does it to protect us."

"From what?"

"I don't know," he replied. "That is what Aren was trying to learn. Anyway, he came to me soon after and said he no longer wished to be a librarian or a scholar. He was taking Kaelyn to Addletown and they were going to become farmers. You can imagine my shock and surprise, but he said that Kaelyn was expecting, and he needed to distance himself from *his* empire as much as he could."

"That still doesn't answer the question of why you asked us about him?" Eryn said.

"The last thing he said to me before he left was to keep an eye out for those who were seeking a history of the Empire. Not just browsing, but truly seeking. He said to ask them if they knew him, and to tell them where he could be found, that he had things to share. He wouldn't tell

me what. He said it wasn't safe. He said even Kaelyn didn't know everything."

Silas sat silent for a long time, forcing Eryn and Markus to sit quietly as well. He searched his mind for the memories of all he had been told, for any connection he could find. How did this all fit with the Overlord being so desperate to have him killed? Did it have anything to do with him at all? How could Aren have been Cursed, and have a child? What had he learned that caused him to leave the city?

"Thank you, Markus," Silas said at last. "You've been more helpful than I could have imagined." He backed up and reached for the door.

"Silas?" Markus asked.

"Yes?"

"What are you going to do?"

"We're going to learn the truth."

"What about my daughter?"

The words were hard for him to say, but he knew it was what Markus needed to hear. "I can't bring her back, Markus. I wish that I could. Her death, and the death of our grandchild is on my conscience, and I will end my life knowing that I murdered them all. Until then, I will live to avenge them from the tyrant that set us all on this course."

There was a moment of silence, and then Markus spoke.

"See that you do."

CHAPTER THIRTY-ONE

Silas & Eryn

They found their own way out of the library. Eryn could tell that Silas was shaken; his posture was slumped and his expression dour.

"Silas?" She was worried about him.

"For some reason, every step closer leaves me feeling further away," he said, looking up at the sky. "This things I've done, the person I was. Even my name." He paused, lowering his head back to the ground. "Let's head up towards the Palace. It will be dusk soon, and the crowds will already be gathering for the hanging. We'll figure out what to do after."

"Okay," Eryn said. She didn't want to see a man hang, but she wouldn't leave Silas to go alone either.

They started walking up the hill. Silas was so preoccupied he never even noticed the soldiers they passed, who gave them a simple glance, but not a second.

The palace had walls of its own, tall and thick and made of stone, built to withstand a long siege. The outer gates were typically closed in the evening, after the Overlord had finished his daily hearings, but today they remained open. A large crowd was coming up from the lower part of the city, and shuffling in to see the proceedings.

Silas and Eryn were mixed in with the crowd, two more nondescript faces in the sea of humanity. They were a little late, and so they had to wait at the back of the line while those in front filed past the soldiers at the gates. They hadn't gone far when Eryn felt a hand on her rear.

She spun around, ready to confront whoever had touched her, but she saw nothing. Then she looked down.

Morie gestured to her, but didn't speak. He waved his hand, and then tumbled away through the crowd. "Father," she said to Silas, putting her hand on his shoulder and pointing. "That dwarf just groped me."

Silas turned and followed her point. He looked back towards the gates to the Palace, and then they followed after, pushing their way through the masses to chase after the performer.

He let them catch up once they were off the main road and down a small alley.

"Morie, what's going on?" Silas asked.

"Don't go in there," he said. "It's a trap."

"What do you mean?" Eryn asked.

"The Overlord. He means to get as much of the populace into the palace gates as he can, and then search them one by one. The hanging is a ruse, meant to attract you to it. If they were to hang anyone, it would have been you."

"Who told you this?" Silas had lost the sad expression, exchanging it for a more purposeful one.

"Tabitha. She works in the Overlord's kitchen. She's Galvan's sweetheart. He would have come himself, but he's too pretty. He gets too much attention. Nobody notices me."

Silas rubbed his chin.

"Silas, we can't," Eryn said. "We'll be caught."

He looked at her. "I know. Let's go back to the theater. Thank you, Morie."

The dwarf gave them a theatrical bow, and bounded off back into the crowds.

"Are you okay?" Eryn asked, once they were down the hill and towards the east side of

the city. The streets were almost deserted, with most of the inhabitants gone to see the execution that wasn't going to happen.

"My wife is gone. My son is dead, his wife and their child with them. Who was I, Eryn? How did I ever believe in *him*? General Talon Rast? How could I have been that person before, and be this person now? It makes no sense to me. Why would losing my memories cause me such guilt, such hurt?"

Eryn took his arm, and wrapped her own around it. She put his hand in hers and squeezed it. "We'll find out, Silas," she said. "We won't rest until we do."

He looked at her and nodded. "We need to go to Addletown," he said. "We need to see what we can discover there."

"Won't the soldiers have razed Aren's home?" she asked.

"Yes, but Aren would know that would happen, the moment he ran. He would have planned for it. If there was important information he was saving for the right person, it's still there, somewhere. Our task is to find it."

They reached the theater, and knocked. Two quick taps, a pause, and two more.

Constable Letten opened the door.

"Can I help you?" he asked them. Eryn looked past his shoulder, and saw Edgar with shackles on his hands and feet.

"What are you doing to Edgar?" Eryn said.

He turned his head and looked back at him. "You mean, the traitor? We'll be taking him off to the ore mines. That's what happens to people who help fugitives get into the city."

"They've done nothing wrong," Eryn said. "They're just actors. My father, Eddard and I, we were here for singing lessons."

Letten laughed. "You'll have to learn to sing somewhere else." He started to push the door closed.

Eryn felt her heart began to race. She could see Edgar, his head bowed, his eyes red. She could see Bryant behind him, his face bruised from the beating the soldiers had given him. She had lost a family once. She wasn't going to just let them get taken again.

Before she knew what she was doing, she bent down and grabbed the hidden knife from Silas' boot. In one clean motion, she brought it up and into the Constable's thigh.

"What the...?"

It was all he got out before Silas reacted. He threw himself against the door, shoving it open and sending Letten flailing backwards. He gave Eryn a single disapproving glance before he was on top of the Constable, his knee planted against his neck, his hand reaching for the man's sword.

Eryn overcame her surprise and dashed into the room. Bryant recognized her, and he brought his chained hands around and clubbed a soldier in the side, knocking him to the ground. He pulled the chain up just in time to prevent his neck from being slashed by the other soldier.

Silas had the Constable's sword, and he balanced his knee on Letten's throat while he fended off an attack, his blade and body shifting and moving like a tree in the wind. The Constable flailed under him, trying to get him off, but he had no leverage, and he shuddered and grasped for life with increasing panic.

The other three soldiers had been downstairs, and now Eryn heard screaming and shouting, and their boots on the steps. They reached the ballroom just as she reached the fireplace, holding her breath as she leaped in towards the flames.

She felt the heat of it against her legs, but she was through too quickly to be burned. It

didn't stop her dress from smoldering, and she bent down and smacked it with her hand as fast as she could. She turned and found their things, opening the saddlebag and pulling out the rod with the white stone at the end.

She closed her eyes and tried to concentrate. She focused on the heat of the fire to help her picture the forge, and to see herself working the bellows. She heard the sounds of battle behind it, the clang of steel on steel, shouting, and screaming. She opened her eyes.

A soldier was leaning down, peering into the fireplace, his eyes resting right on her. Eryn took the rod and swung it, cracking it into the man's unprotected jaw. He screamed and fell back.

She threw the rod away and found her sword, resting in its old scabbard. She grabbed the whole thing and leaped back through the fire. Silas was on his feet now, dispatching a third soldier. Edgar was curled into a ball on the floor, blood pooling around him. Bryant was backing away from a soldier, doing his best to keep the chains between himself and the man's blade.

Eryn pulled her blade free and charged towards him, sword overhead as Silas had taught her. He saw her coming at the last moment, turning and bringing his own sword up to block hers. He was surprised to find himself facing a woman, and he hesitated. Eryn didn't. She grabbed his sword hand to keep it away, and stabbed him.

The remaining soldier stood in the center of the ballroom, looking at the open door. Silas stepped in front of it.

"Drop your sword," he said.

The soldier considered, and then charged.

It was over in a blink. The onrushing man tried to stab Silas, but he brought his own blade back, stepped to the side, pushed the blade off course, and slashed the soldier's chest. He fell forward onto his stomach.

Eryn rushed over to where Edgar was laying on the floor. "Edgar!"

He was still alive. He turned his head and looked up at her. "I'm sorry, my dear," he said.

"I was too bold. I... I... thought, my brother... could protect me." His eyes dulled.

"Eryn."

She looked up. Silas was walking towards her, his face tight with anger.

"Just tell me why," he said.

She stared up at him, tears forming in her eyes. Edgar was dead, and it was her fault. If she had let the Constable close the door, they would have taken him to the ore mines. It would have been difficult for him, but he would still be alive, and they would still have a chance to set him free. Now, there was no chance for anything.

"Don't you know why?" she asked, her voice barely more than a sad whisper.

He stood over her, glaring. Then his face softened.

"Yes," he replied, crouching down and putting a hand on her shoulder. "We have to go."

He stood and walked over to Bryant. "Hold out your wrists," he said. The big man complied, and he used the Constable's blade to cut through the chains.

"Bryant, why was Letten here? How did he find out about us?"

Bryant shook his head. "Not you," he said.

"It's our fault," Robar said, appearing at the top of the stairs. His face was bloodied, and he was still shackled, but he had shuffled his way up. "He was following us the whole time. I don't know how he got past the spotters."

"How many of them went to see the hanging?" Silas asked. He was willing to bet it was most of them.

"I'm such a fool," Robar said. "Such a fool."

"The Overlord isn't taking any chances," Silas said. "He was hoping that if the hanging didn't draw me out, Letten would be able to find me."

He turned and looked back at the open door. "Grab as much as you can, we need to go now. Bryant, go find the Constable's keys and unchain them." He dropped the Constable's sword and ran for the fireplace.

Eryn got to her feet. "Robar, where are the others? Galvan, Canae, Lanae?"

"They went to see the hanging. Sena is downstairs with Winslow, they're okay, but chained."

Bryant knelt over Letten's body. He shifted him until he found a ring of keys. After he pulled it off, he stood up and spit on the Constable. "To Heden with you."

Bryant unchained Robar, who took the keys and went downstairs. Silas came back through the fire, holding the saddlebags and his sword. "Bryant, do you have somewhere else you can go?"

"We have friend, outside the walls. Have to warn others first."

He disappeared down the stairs, leaving Silas and Eryn alone.

"They weren't going to take them to the ore mines," Silas said. He opened the saddlebag and pulled out the coin purse.

Eryn was confused. "What do you mean?"

"There are more men on their way. The Overlord has always known I've been here. He just needed time to set a plan in motion to capture me."

"How do you know?"

"It's what I would have done, if I had been thinking like General Talon Rast." He pulled out Alyssa's ring, kissed it, and put it back. "If you want to come with me, go downstairs and

change your clothes. Put on something you can move quietly in."

"Where are we going?" she asked.

"To find the Overlord, before he finds us."

CHAPTER THIRTY-TWO

Silas

Silas had removed most of the makeup on his face by the time Eryn returned, flanked by Bryant, Robar, Sena, and Winslow. Bryant had a bucket of blue paint in one hand, a brush in the other. He ran out the front door.

"What is he doing?" Eryn asked.

"He'll paint parts of the street blue," Sena said. "Small marks that the soldiers won't notice, but the troupe will. They'll know it's not safe, and go to the temple."

"The temple to Amman?"

"The one outside the walls," Winslow said. "The priest there, Colm, is a friend of ours. He was a member of the troupe, before he chose to follow the path of Amman."

"Get going," Silas said. "The Overlord's soldiers could show any minute."

"What about you?" Sena asked.

"We'll meet up with you at the temple. We have other business to attend to first."

They fled the theater.

He looked Eryn over. She had pulled off the wig, and thrown some water over her own face to clear the makeup and putty. She was wearing a dark tunic with loose black pants and short leather boots. Combined with her short hair, she would be easy to mistake for a boy.

"Take this," he said, throwing her the coin purse. "The blue stone is at the bottom, if you need it."

Eryn caught it, and tucked it into her pants. "I don't know if I can do it," she said. "I tried to use the stone on the rod, but I couldn't concentrate with all of the fighting."

"That's okay. I know you'll do your best. I'd tell you to stay behind, but I don't expect that you'll listen."

"I'm coming. I'd rather die fighting, than live running. I could have gone off to join the rebellion if that was what I wanted."

"Remember what I taught you, and stay close. We're going to go north up the west side of the city to the lake. We'll try to find a way in from the back."

Eryn came over, reached up, and wrapped her arms around him in a tight hug. Silas was stiff at first, but then he joined her in the embrace.

"Thank you for everything, Silas," she said.

"It isn't over yet," he replied, letting her go.

They went to the open door of the theater and looked out. The sun was setting, and the streets were growing dark. Someone would be along soon to light the oil lamps, but for now the area was deserted.

"This way," Silas said, motioning for Eryn to follow. They stayed close to the buildings, walking north to the corner. He saw it now, the small blue mark Bryant had painted on the street. He had only noticed it because he was looking for it.

"I hear horses," Eryn said.

Silas peeked around the corner. He could see torches in the distance; soldiers on horseback, coming down the hill towards them.

"Across the street," he said. "Run!"

They ran across the street. When they reached the other side Silas doubled back to check

if they had been seen. The soldiers hadn't changed their pace.

"How far to the lake?" Eryn asked.

"Seven or eight blocks," he replied.

They started running again. They had nearly reached the next corner when they heard footsteps. Silas took Eryn's hand and led her to a tight alley between two of the buildings. He crouched down with her behind him.

Four soldiers came from around the corner, swords at their hips and crossbows in their hands. They looked like they were on edge, expecting to be attacked.

"We have to surprise them," Silas whispered. "It would be like shooting barrels to hit us in this alley."

He pulled the knife from his boot, and held it up, ready to throw.

"When I throw the knife, we charge," he said. "Stay behind me."

The four soldiers approached, their eyes sweeping back and forth along the street. One of them kept his gaze up, expecting that they might be on the rooftops.

He was the first to fall, a knife sticking out of his neck. The road wasn't that wide, and by the time the other soldiers reacted, Silas was right on top of them. They tried to spin to fire, but they got in one another's way, and hesitated for too long. He tore into them with the Mediator's sword, the lustrous alloy cutting through their armor as though it were cloth instead of iron.

They were all dead before Eryn had time to draw her sword.

"Here," Silas said, handing her a crossbow.

"I don't know how to use this," she replied.

"Press this to release the string and fire the bolt," Silas said. "Pull the string back, put it in here, and then put the bolt there. It's easier than a bow, and you can shoot one of those."

He took the quiver from one of the men and handed it to her. She slipped it over her back, and held the crossbow the way the soldiers had.

They ran north another block, and then ducked into an alley. They heard the voices of the soldiers on horseback, reaching those they had killed. Silas peeked out from the alley, seeing two soldiers riding towards the theater with torches in their hands.

"Stay close to the buildings, go slow," Silas said.

They snuck out of the alley and crept along the side of the building, holding as close to it as they could to avoid being seen. They had nearly reached the next block, when a voice cried out from above them.

"Guards! He's down 'ere!"

The soldiers on the horses turned their direction and kicked their mounts forward.

"Run," Silas said.

They ran, away from the oncoming horses.

"We can't outrun them," Eryn cried.

They could hear the horses getting closer. Silas reached out and took Eryn's hand, pulling her towards him. An arrow sailed by and bounced off the street.

"Hey, in here!"

A door opened in front of them.

They headed for it, falling inside just as an arrow struck the wall behind them. The door swung closed.

"Who are you?" Eryn asked. There were three men standing over them, each armed with a crossbow. They were young, not much older than her, each with short brown hair and fair skin.

One of them held out his hand, and helped her up. Silas pushed himself to his feet on his

own.

"Rebels," he said. "They'll hang you for this."

"They've done worse to our family," one of them said. "I don't know why the Overlord wants you so bad, but as far as I'm concerned, helping you is the best thing we can do."

"Do you know what's happening?"

They heard the snorting and whining of the horses as the soldiers reached the door.

"Overlord's got most of the city locked up in the palace courtyard. He's got another five hundred or so soldiers going door to door, every single home, looking for you. Then he's got the blokes in the streets. We've been waiting for them to come try to search the place." He motioned to a door behind him. "We've got a weapons store down there, for the rebellion. For when the time came. We couldn't get it moved out, so we figured we'd take a few of *his* bastards with us."

He motioned for them to stand to the side of the door, and then the rebels took up position next to it.

"Open it," he said.

Silas jerked the door open. The two horsemen were sitting right in front of it, trying to light a torch. Two crossbow bolts knocked them from their horses.

"Name's Atticus," the leader said. He was the oldest and tallest. "These are my brothers, Elrad and Orm. Where are you headed?"

"I need to get to the palace."

Atticus smiled. "You want to go *to* the palace? You know it's east of here, not north?"

"From the lake," Silas said.

Atticus bobbed his head up and down. "Take the horses. We have a man at the wharf, his name is Deshon. He helps us move stuff in and out. He can put you right up to the cliffs behind

the palace without being seen, but you'll have to climb up from there. He says he's done it once, just for fun, but I think he's full of dung. Anyways, just tell him Attie sent you."

"How will I find him?" Silas asked.

"Ah, don't worry," Atticus said with a laugh. "Deshon stands out."

"We'll try to keep them off your back," Orm said, while reloading his crossbow.

"Come on," Silas said. He and Eryn went back out into the street. Silas bent down over one of the soldiers and unbuckled his sword belt, slipping it around his waist and sliding his sword into the scabbard. "Leave the crossbow," he instructed Eryn as they mounted the horses. "It'll draw too much attention."

The brothers followed them out, heading in the other direction. Atticus began shouting.

"Are you tired of the oppression of *his* rule? Are you sick of giving up your hard earned coin for taxes on everything from bread to clothes? Have your mother, father, brother, or sister been taken to the ore mines, or killed for little more than looking at a soldier the wrong way? Come out into the streets. Do not be afraid. Stand up to *him*, as we're standing up to *him*..."

His voice faded into the background as they raced north.

The wharf was the busiest part of the city, and also the biggest. It stretched from the east wall all the way to the city center, where part of the hill the palace rested on had been excavated to allow for more dock space. Ships could sail from the Small Sea down the river to Elling Lake, and find port at the city to unload or load their trade goods, to bring back the other direction. The Small Sea connected to the Great Sea, and while only the adventurous tried to cross the Great Sea to the unknown lands, the cogs could hold the shoreline to the east and then south to many of the Empire's other coastal provinces.

Activity at the wharf didn't seem slowed by the hanging, or the Overlord's pursuit of

them. Cargo was being loaded and unloaded from large, three-masted, wooden ships, while smaller boats handled nets of fish or clams. All around them merchants made deals for the offloaded cargo, or bargained to have their trade goods sent to this place or that, while prostitutes tried to entice the sailors and sailors headed into and out of brothels, taverns, and shops. It was busy enough that once they had dismounted and sent the horses on their way, they were able to blend into the crowd, and sneak around the soldiers patrolling the area.

"How do we find Deshon?" Eryn asked.

"Atticus said he stands out," Silas said.

They walked along the wharf, to the east in the direction of the palace, searching for a sign of Deshon with one eye, and watching for soldiers with the other. Whenever a retinue would walk past, they would duck off to the side and put their heads down, and try not to be seen.

"There," Eryn said, pointing.

Silas followed her finger to a sleek looking wooden ship with three tall masts. A metal plaque was affixed to the rear. *The Flying Deshon*.

"That does stand out," Silas said. They headed over to it, hitting the dock at a fast walk.

"Where do you think you're going?"

The voice came from behind them. They turned around, coming face to face with a muscular, dark-skinned man with short black hair and a beard with colored beads hanging from it. His eyes regarded them cautiously, while his hands toyed with a large dagger.

"What business is it of yours?" Silas asked.

The man smiled. "I know you," he said. "The soldiers are looking for you. There's a nice reward for your capture. Dead, or alive. Or... I could just shout."

"You won't," Silas said.

"No?"

"Attie sent us."

"Did he?" The man walked toward them, still brandishing the knife.

Silas could feel Eryn tensing next to him, so he put his hand out to hold her at bay.

"How did you know it was me?" Deshon asked, once he was close enough to talk quietly.

"The center mast," Silas said. "The flags are the same colors as the beads in your beard."

Deshon laughed. "You are a clever one. No wonder the Overlord is so desperate to get his hands on you. What do you need from me?"

"I need you to bring us to the palace."

"Both of you?" he asked, looking at Eryn. "Your boy can't be more than thirteen. A little young for suicide, eh?"

"Fourteen," Eryn said, "and a girl."

Deshon laughed and shook his head. "If Atticus sent you to me, who am I to judge. Follow me." He turned and started walking back up the dock.

"Where are we going?" Eryn asked.

"We can't take the Flying Deshon right under the palace cliffs, boy," he said. "We need something a little smaller."

They walked down the wharf, to a dock lined with small fishing boats. Deshon approached a skinny, bare-chested man standing in one of the boats, leaning over a net.

"Polson," Deshon said. "I need to borrow your boat, for my friends. Attie sent them."

The man, Polson, scowled. "This isn't a good time, Desh."

Deshon laughed. "This here's Silas Morningstar. You know, the fugitive the Overlord is so eager to disembowel? He needs a lift to the palace, so he can do the Overlord first."

Polson looked them both over, and climbed out of his boat. He put his face right up to Silas', and put his hand on his shoulder.

"Soldiers took my sister to the mines. They said it was because she was stealing, but I know it wasn't. One of the tax collectors took a liking to her, and when she refused he accused her. The Overlord wouldn't even hear her case." His eyes started tearing. "There's a lot of us, we're sick of *his* rule, and the way the Overlord strong arms us common folk. I don't know if killing him will change anything, or even if it will make it worse, but somebody needs to pay. I hope you do it painful."

Silas looked him in the eye, seeing the pain at its depths.

Murderer.

"I'll do what I can," he said.

Deshon climbed into the boat, Eryn and Silas right behind. He picked up the oars and placed them over the sides, and started rowing with a surprising strength. Polson stood on the dock, watching them go. Behind him, Silas could see soldiers running through the streets, headed south.

He wondered what kind of trouble Atticus was causing.

CHAPTER THIRTY-THREE

Eryn

Eryn tried to remember not to look down, as she followed Silas up the rock face of the cliffs behind the palace.

Deshon had been true to Atticus' word, somehow maneuvering through the currents of the lake to drop them off beneath the cliffs without smashing them against the rocks. He had also managed to stay so tight to the shoreline that the lookouts posted along the northern wall of the palace had yet to see them coming.

It wasn't the first time Eryn was thankful for the forge, and the strength it had put in her arms. The months of swordplay with Silas hadn't hurt either, preparing her muscles for extended use. Even so, the one hundred foot climb was grueling, her body aching with every movement, and her mind telling her to panic whenever she accidentally thought of what would happen if she slipped.

She cast more than one silent prayer to Amman that they would reach the top of the cliff, where there was a small ledge before the wall of the palace.

"How are you doing?" Silas asked, looking down at her. He had asked every few feet, and she was jealous that he seemed to be handling the climb with such ease.

"Just keep going," she replied. Maybe it was his eagerness to confront the Overlord at last that was keeping him going?

They moved slowly, carefully picking out the face of the ledge with the best hand and

footholds. Twice, they had to leap horizontally to get to the next climbable segment. Twice, Eryn had been terrified while her body was airborne, only to feel a rush and a sense of excitement when she found a hold.

The sun had been swallowed by the horizon by the time they finished the climb, coming to rest with their backs to the palace wall while they caught their breath and eased tired muscles.

"What now?" Eryn asked. She looked both ways along the wall, and all she saw was smooth stone.

"There should be a small drain under the northeast tower," he said. "At least, Deshon said there was."

"I'm ready," Eryn said.

They ran, pressed tight against the wall, until they reached the curve of the tower. The drain was hard to see; slightly submerged below the ground level, a trickle of water flowing through a metal gate and down the side of the cliff. Even though they were both lean, it was going to be a tight fit.

"It's going to make a lot of noise to cut through this," Silas said. "Do you think you can use your Curse on it?"

Eryn looked at it. It wasn't much different than a stuck door. She closed her eyes and concentrated on relaxing her breathing. Her practice had paid off, and she felt the tingle between her ears within moments. It rolled down her body, and she held out her hand and felt it flow to her fingers.

"Opire," she said, turning her palm up and closing her hand, as though she was pulling the gate to her.

There was a soft clatter as it came free of the stone around it, and flew out over the cliff.

They were high enough up that they could barely hear the splash when it hit the water.

"Thank you," Silas said. He got down on his hands and knees, and crawled through the drain like a worm. Eryn wiped her eye, and followed behind him.

They passed under eight feet of solid stone, and came out into the bottom of the northeast tower, where some of the water was flowing out of a clay pipe that rose up the wall. There was about three feet of space above them, the center capped by a wooden hatch. A tiny amount of light filtered in from the other side, where the water flow continued out to the rest of the palace.

"What is this for?" Eryn whispered.

"Waste," Silas said. "These clay pipes are run throughout the palace, dropping down into channels dug into the earth. The channels carry all of the water and waste out through here."

Silas pushed on the hatch, finding it unlocked. He carefully flipped it open, and stood up.

The inside of the tower was lit with oil lamps. The space they were in was empty. To the side were stairs that wound around the sides of the tower. Looking up, Silas could see the stone of the floor above them. He leaned down and helped Eryn up, and then closed the hatch.

"The hatch is here so they can clean off the gate," he said. "It's bound to get clogged from time to time."

Eryn was just glad it hadn't been clogged for them. The front of her clothes were soaking wet, and she didn't want to think of what they were soaked with.

Silas drew his sword, and they climbed the stairs, reaching the first floor and finding it unoccupied. The door from the tower to the inner palace grounds waited in front of them.

"We'll try to be quiet, but be ready, just in case."

The tower door wasn't locked either. Silas pulled it open as slowly as he could, and they looked outside.

Two guards were walking a worn path from east to west, between the walls and the rest of the grounds. Eryn could see stables to their left, and a training field to their right, with straw and wood dummies and bales of hay with targets painted on them. She could also hear the murmur of the crowds that were gathered in the front courtyard, being held captive by the Overlord.

They ducked their heads back inside, and pushed the door closed, so the guards wouldn't see them.

"How are we going to get past them?" Eryn asked.

Silas held up his hand. "Counting."

They stood silently for some time before Silas pushed the door open just enough to squeeze past, and started walking down the steps. Eryn followed behind. The guards were halfway across the grass, facing the other direction. How had he done that?

They reached the side of the stables before the guards started their return trip, finding safety between the building and the eastern wall. When they reached the other side, they could see a small door attached to the main palace building, a huge stone and wood structure that seemed to go on forever. Looking up, Eryn could see the two tall towers, disappearing into the sky.

"That door should lead to the kitchens," Silas said. "Once we get in, they're going to raise the alarm. We need to find the Overlord before they can bring the soldiers from the courtyard. I don't want to give you false hope. There's a very good chance we'll die."

Eryn had understood that from the beginning. She had promised her mother she would survive, but to her that didn't mean hiding somewhere while other people suffered, while others like her were hunted and killed. The Overlord wasn't *him*, but he was her home province's

representation of *him*. She would rather die trying to make a statement about *his* rule, about the lives *he* affected, and the ability of even a young girl from one of *his* tiny villages to stand up to *his* cruelty, rather than live as a coward.

"I know," she said. "Thank you again, Silas. You've been a wonderful mentor and friend."

He looked at her and smiled. "You've been a fantastic student. You've been an even better partner. Let's go."

They crossed the grass at a dead run, not even trying to hide. There were no cries or shouts of alarm from the outside, but when they pushed open the door and stepped into the kitchens, there was plenty of commotion.

It wasn't targeted at them. The kitchen was a busy place of its own, with cooks, maids and servants rushing around to meet the needs of the palace's many inhabitants. It wasn't only the Overlord who stayed there, but many of the lesser titled positions of the province as well.

They didn't notice Silas and Eryn right away, and it gave them enough time to locate the exit through an open door to the south. All they had to do was cross the room.

Silas sheathed his sword, and walked ahead with calm purpose. Eryn decided to follow his lead, and she fell in behind him, equally confident. The servants began to notice them as they passed, but the demeanor and attitude of belonging caused them to spare only a moments glance before returning to their tasks. They had more personal concerns than two nobles taking a stroll through the kitchen, and they didn't look long enough to notice the dampness of their clothing.

The other side opened up in to a large foyer with an arched passage to the left and right, and two doors in the center, spaced a dozen feet apart. They stepped to one side of the kitchen and pressed their backs to the wall.

"Which way?" Eryn asked.

"Most of *his* palaces are the same. The banquet hall is in front of us. The throne room will be in front of that. Both left and right passages should wrap around, with stairs up to a second level balcony and living quarters. I expect the Overlord will be in his throne room, overseeing the search of the crowd. Let's-"

Silas was interrupted when two soldiers walked in from the kitchen area, holding pastries in their hands. They didn't see the two of them, and they turned left and headed down the hallway.

"That was close," Eryn whispered.

Silas nodded. "We need to make this quick," he said. "We'll go through the banquet hall."

He went over to the door on the right and put his ear to it, and then he took the handle and pulled it open.

Eryn couldn't believe the size of the room. At least a hundred feet long or more, with a high ceiling encircled with colored glass, and a dozen or more chandeliers hanging from wooden beams that crossed high above, but not as high as the rooftop. Three huge tables took up the floor space, with enough seats for three or four hundred people. The center table was slightly higher than the other two, and the chair at its head was large and ornate, with dark blue velvet and leather. Thankfully, nobody was sitting in it, or any of the other chairs.

"Wait," Silas said, putting his hand up in front of her when she started to move. He pointed up to a high balcony she hadn't noticed, where a guard was walking along the hallway, eating the pastry they had seen him with only moments before. "Under the table," he said.

They dropped down and crawled over to the long table, using it to block the soldier from seeing them. They inched hand over hand along the ground towards the other side of the room. Eryn held her breath, just waiting for the guard to start yelling.

Tense minutes passed, but the guard never saw them. They looked up at him when they reached the end of the table, and saw him scanning the room.

"Give me a coin from the purse," he said.

Eryn took the purse out of her pocket. Silas had tied it tight so that the coins couldn't shift while they moved and make noise, and she didn't know how to open it. She handed the whole thing to him.

"I'll need to teach you knots," he whispered, tugging on the string and opening the purse. He took out a copper coin, and then carefully knotted it closed again and handed it back.

He looked up at the guard, and then tossed the coin through the air. The moment it landed on the other side of the room with a clatter, he ran for the door, with Eryn right behind.

The guard's head had followed the noise, so he didn't see them. Silas opened the door just enough, and they both slipped through.

Eryn discovered that the throne room of the palace was almost as large as the banquet hall, and they shared similar design in the stained glass ringed ceilings, the wooden beams supporting many chandeliers, the balcony running high above the main floor, and the overall feeling of grandiosity. Yet where the banquet hall had been functional, the throne room was opulent. Thick red carpets lined a polished marble floor, ornately sculpted marble columns reached up to support the balcony, and there was gilding and gold-leafing on parts of almost everything.

She couldn't see the throne itself, as the door they entered through was adjacent to the raised dais on which it sat. What she could see was the far end of the room, where there was a set of closed double wooden doors on the east and west walls, and an open set of doors directly in front that led out to a large balcony. Eryn could hear the noise of the crowd gathered outside, a

hushed murmur of fear and discontent.

There were four people standing on the balcony, their backs turned to them. The Overlord was easy to pick out, wearing a rich purple cloak and a small crown of office. The man standing next to him might have been an advisor, but he didn't have the look of a noble, and he was wearing a sword at his hip. The other two were dressed in the chain mail and blacks of *his* soldiers.

Silas led her over to the side of the room, and they hid behind the columns. "I need to get a look at him," he said. "Wait here."

She stayed crouched behind the column while Silas padded quietly from one to the next, moving ever closer to the balcony in order to see the face of the man who was going through so much trouble to kill him.

Silas was halfway across the throne room, pressed up to one of the columns and peering around it, when the Overlord turned to say something to his advisor.

He was still too far away for Eryn to see clearly, but she could tell by Silas' face that he had gotten the glimpse he wanted. All of the blood seemed to have rushed out of him, and she watched him go down to his knees and put his head in his hands. As he did, the tip of his scabbard knocked into the ground, creating a soft but audible tap. The Overlord's advisor turned his head, looking towards the room, and Eryn snatched her head back. She sat there, her heart pounding, listening for any sound that would indicate the man had seen her or Silas.

She heard boots on the marble floor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FOUR

Silas

General Talon Rast steered his huge white destrier, Abitha, through the gates of Elling City, drawing awed stares from commoners and soldiers alike. He didn't pay them any attention, his mind swimming in a mix of anger and despair.

He had ridden hard from the Elling countryside, from a tiny village named Heathers, where he had heard a story he still had trouble believing, but that contained enough of a ring of truth that it had brought him racing to the province's capital city.

Four years, he thought as he rode north, up the winding road to the palace above. *Four years since she left me.*

He stared straight ahead, letting Abitha lead the way. She knew it well, for they had been there many times before.

He considered the last four years of his life, and how his once iron-clad assurance of what was right and true had slipped away a little more with each passing sunrise, his guilt at the decision he made to order Aren's capture a weight that grew harder and harder to bear.

An image hung unbidden in his mind; an image of a ship, disappearing over the horizon on its way to the unknown lands. He was a man of war, and had been for as long as he could remember. The ship carried away the only peace he had ever found. Peace that he had destroyed for the love of loyalty and duty.

More and more he had been questioning his loyalty, and questioning his duty. He had

seen too much death, too much ugliness, too much destruction. He had sought the village where Aren had lived, and died. He had gone to apologize.

The body had been burned. That was what the soldiers had reported. They had confronted him, he had run, and a Mediator was sent to retrieve him. To hear them tell it, he had killed two soldiers before he and the Mediator had killed one another. He was a powerful Cursed, they had said.

He couldn't be sure how much of it was a lie. Aren had been an intelligent boy, a scholar. He had made plans for the event of his death, as though he had known that it would come about sooner or later, one way or another. That had been the thing that had surprised him the most, when he had entered that three room inn in Heathers, four years after his son was killed.

He had told the innkeeper who he was, and asked for a meal and a room. Instead, the innkeeper had handed him a sealed letter.

"I told him he was crazy to think that you would ever show up here. Addleton's a good day's ride out, after all, and you being a General in *his* army. The boy insisted that you would show, even if it took you a hundred years. I've never seen anyone so sure of anything."

Talon patted the chest of his jerkin, where he had spread the ashes of the letter to his skin after he had read and then burned it. He had cried while he had done so, the guilt multiplying and coalescing with a new anger. If it was true, *he* had to have known, and *he* did nothing to stop it.

Then there was the thought of what it all meant, beyond his own family. Aren had claimed he had learned things that *he* had never wanted anyone to know, and that *he* had gone through great lengths to prevent anyone from knowing. So many lost, so many dead.

Iolis Elling. He still couldn't believe *he* had placed the youngest son of Harran Elling as Overlord of the province, over his older brother Colm. There had been no reason to it, he knew.

Except for one. It was why he had come.

He pulled himself out of his thoughts, and followed Abitha's head. They had nearly reached the front gates of the palace, and already the guards there were busy having them opened before he was forced to wait.

They went to their knees as he went by, showing utmost respect for their General, their hero, who had defended *his* rule from a half-dozen random uprisings throughout his years. For many of those, he had bought into the celebrity and the accolades. He realized he might find himself wishing he had been on the other side.

He rode Abitha right past the ornately carved wooden doors, into the large marble foyer where the petitioners would wait every morning for the Magistrate to determine which cases the Overlord would hear. There were fifty or more merchants, landlords, nobles, and the like milling about inside, papers in hand, and they stared and muttered about the horse entering the palace, until they saw who was astride.

"General Rast," the Magistrate said, pushing his current conversation aside and approaching him. "Your visit is unexpected."

"I need to speak with the Overlord," he said. "It is quite urgent."

The Magistrate nodded. "His Excellency is currently hearing the-"

Talon put his hand on the man's shoulder. "Urgent."

A weak smile, a bob of the head, and the Magistrate exited out of the room to the right, where a curved staircase led up to the throne room.

Talon stood and waited, while a soldier came and took Abitha's reins, bringing her from the foyer. The petitioners kept a wide berth around him, and their conversations had died out while they waited for him to move on.

The Magistrate returned a few minutes later.

"He will meet you in his private chambers," he said.

Talon nodded, and headed for the smaller door on the north wall of the foyer. He knew it would take him back, beneath the throne room to a spiral staircase that rose behind the dais of the throne, up to the third floor of the palace. There was a study there, a large room with a desk, quill, and books of law, where the Overlord spent the majority of his time when not holding court.

Iolis was already waiting for him when he entered without knocking. He had his back to him, an open book in one hand that he traced with his other while he feigned reading.

"Is it true?"

That was all he said to the Overlord. Iolis turned around.

He is so young, Talon thought, and not for the first time. He looked barely more than eighteen, with short black hair, thin lips, and a forced smile.

He closed the book, and placed it onto the desk. "Is what true, General?" he asked.

"The Curse. Is it true?"

Iolis spread his hands in supplication. "General, I'm afraid I-"

Talon stepped towards him, putting his hand on the hilt of his sword.

"Don't play games. Tell me if it's true," he screamed.

Iolis backed up a few steps, his calm demeanor unbroken. "What if it is, Talon?" His eyes were challenging.

He could feel his anger rising. "My son."

"Your son was a dissident, Talon. A traitor, and a rebel. You refused to see past his blood to the truth."

"He was a scholar," Talon replied. "A man of books and learning. He didn't sew dissent, he sought the truth. Truth that was written long before *he* came into power. Truth that *he* has worked very hard to erase."

Iolis laughed softly. "Truth is dissent," he said. "Why do you seek that which is forbidden, unless your aim is to cause trouble with it? Why did a man who didn't have the Curse work so hard to discover its origins?"

"Why is *he* killing them?" Talon demanded. "Why did *he* let me kill my son, when *he* could have cured him?"

He slid his sword from its scabbard, the bright, etched alloy reflecting in the light like a crystal.

"Why did you sicken him with it?"

"Are you mad?" Iolis shouted. "You've never been the same since your wife left you, but this is lunacy. You can't cure the Curse, and you certainly can't give it to someone. You either develop the Curse when you reach adulthood, or you don't. Some hide it better than others, and it takes more time to catch them, but that is the only way it happens."

"You're lying," Talon said.

"*He's* been worried about you, Talon. Now I know why. Your grief has made you delusional. Where have you been, anyway?"

Talon put his hand to his chest, remembering the letter. He had memorized every word. He spoke some of them to the Overlord.

"There are many things I have learned, father. Things that I was never meant to know. Things that no man was ever meant to know. You are reading this letter because they found out. It is because for as careful as I was, I was not careful enough."

Iolis' eyes widened, but he didn't speak. He walked calmly over to an armoire, placing the key into it and turning it while Talon spoke.

"The Curse. The Curse is not some punishment from Amman, some disfavor of a wrathful god. The Curse is a sickness, a disease. It is carried in the blood. It changes people. It gives them a power I don't understand, but it also makes them sterile, and it makes them sick. If *he* didn't take them, they would die in a few years."

Iolis opened the armoire, and pulled out a small wooden box. He came back and placed it on the desk.

"As a General, you know that the Mediators are Cursed. They have the power of the Cursed, and yet, they live. They live because *he* has a cure. *He* doesn't have to kill any of them. *He* can cure them, but *he* chooses not to. *He* can even let them be, to die on their own, but again *he* chooses not to."

Iolis unlatched the box, and reached inside, pulling out a simple ring of shining alloy, with a gold stone on the top. He slid it onto his finger.

"Why is *he* killing innocent people *he* could save? Why does *he* save those who show the most proficiency with the power? You've put down rebellions, father. You know the answers to those questions. *He* says they take the Cursed to protect everyone else. The only one *he* protects is *himself*."

Talon walked towards the Overlord, tears forming at the base of his eyes. "If you're reading this, I'm dead, and have been for some time. I don't know if you will ever find this, but I write this with a prayer to Amman that you will. The Overlord sent an assassin to kill me. Not with a dagger, but with a much darker poison. He gave me the Curse. He probably had you give the order to have me taken, so that you would never question my death, or wane in your loyalty

to *him*."

He brought the sword up, ready to strike. Iolis stood calmly, looking up at him.

"Mother will never forgive you, and though it may take time, I believe you will never wane in your loyalty to her. They've miscalculated you. I forgive you. I love you. Aren."

Talon looked at Iolis with eyes filled with tears and anger and hate.

"I used to believe that *he* was a good man. That *he* was hated for the things *he* was forced to do for the good of us all. *He* took my son. *He* took my wife. I'm going to kill *him*, but first, I'm going to kill you."

His arm started to move, to come down on Iolis and sever his head from his body. Then the Overlord whispered something, the ring on his hand began to glow, and every muscle in Talon's body froze.

"No," Iolis said. "You aren't."

Talon's face twisted from the effort he was putting into finishing his stroke and ending the Overlord's life. Muscle didn't matter now. If he had known Iolis was Cursed, he would have been more cautious.

Iolis reached up and unbent his fingers, one by one, until the sword clattered to the ground. "As I've said, *he* was worried about you. *He* was afraid you might become... confused. I wanted to kill you. I've wanted to kill you since we found out that your son had taken some things he shouldn't have. It was *his* idea to make his death your idea."

The ring on Iolis' hand continued to glow, and blood started leaking from the Overlord's eye. Talon looked at him, his heart filled with hate and rage, his body unable to move. All of these years, all of the people he had killed in *his* name. For what? Nothing but lies.

"*He* refuses to let me do it," Iolis said. "For as cruel as you probably think *he* is at this

moment, the truth is that *he* is soft. *His* loyalty to you remains, even as you turn your back on *him*."

The Overlord returned to the box, and lifted out a brown stone. He stared at it a moment before bringing it over.

"You're fortunate that we have other ways of making sure you don't cause any more trouble. I'd say more, but you aren't going to remember anyway."

The brown stone began to glow.

Talon's eyes shifted to watch it.

Iolis put it to his forehead.

CHAPTER THIRTY-FIVE

Eryn

Come on, Silas, Eryn thought, hearing the clapping of boots on the marble floor, getting closer to where Silas was kneeling. She knew she had to take the risk. She stuck her head out from around the column, so she could see what was happening.

The Overlord's advisor was only two columns away from where Silas was kneeling, his head still in his hands. Her heart pounding, Eryn pulled her sword from its scabbard, and smacked it against the column, as if by accident.

The man's head snapped towards her, and a look of confusion crossed his brow. "Assassin," he called back. "Come out and die like a man."

The sword came to his hand so fast, she didn't even see him move. Behind him, she could see the Overlord and the soldiers shifting to see what was going on. The soldiers started to move, but he put his arms in front of them. A smile extended across his face.

Eryn stepped out into view, but she had no intention of attacking. She only had a couple of months of training, hardly enough to beat anyone of real skill. She needed to distract him until Silas recovered. If he recovered.

She ran towards the swordsman with her sword up, the way Silas had shown her, and screamed. He smiled at that, and set his blade back in preparation. When she was still twenty feet away, she turned to face the throne, a large, ornate wooden chair at the top of a tall set of carpeted stairs. She ran for it.

She could hear him laughing at her back.

"Where are you going, boy?" the swordsman shouted, not following after her. "You must have some skill to have gotten in here unseen, and they saw fit to arm you with an iridium blade. Why don't you come down here and try your hand? If you're good enough, I'll forgive you for coming to assassinate the Overlord, and you can join my battalion."

Eryn reached the throne and ducked behind it. The man was a soldier. No, more than a soldier, he was a commander of a whole battalion. She had been right not to challenge him. Now she just had to keep him busy.

"I don't want to fight," she said in her deeper, boy voice. "They said the Overlord would be alone. 'Just sneaks up on 'im and poke 'im with the sword,' they said. 'You'll be a hero,' they said."

The man's laughter got louder. "A hero, eh? I'm afraid the Overlord isn't as easy of a target as he may look from down with the rest of the commoners. How old are you, boy?"

"Feng, stop chatting with him and bring him down here," the Overlord said. He had left the balcony, and was approaching the swordsman. The two soldiers stayed behind, watching the crowds.

"I'm fourteen, My Lord," Eryn said, coming out and standing next to the throne. "Been thieving my whole life. There's nothing I can't get into." She looked over to where Silas had been kneeling.

His boots and empty scabbard were there, but he was gone.

"There's something you can't get out of," the Overlord said.

"Iolis," Feng said, "I've made the boy an offer. I'm a man of my word."

The Overlord shook his head. "Fine. Come down here boy, and show the General what

you can do."

Eryn started to step forward. Then she saw Silas.

He was charging at them from the side, out from behind the closest column. He had removed everything but his pants in order to be as quiet as possible.

"No, My Lord. I can't fight you. You'll kill me for sure." She took her sword and threw it, so that it rattled and clattered down the steps. Their eyes followed it while Silas got right up behind them, his sword raised to slash the Overlord across the back.

Feng turned, his own weapon coming up impossibly fast, and smacking Silas' out of the way.

Silas rolled away from the return cut and got to his feet.

"Ahh, there you are," Feng said. "You've been a hard man to find."

Silas stood with his sword raised; his chest heaving, his eyes on fire.

"You don't remember, do you?" Feng asked. "Your own brother."

"Talon," the Overlord said, looking over at him. He turned his head back to Eryn. "I didn't think you still had it in you, to use a child to try to draw me in. Feeling more like yourself these days?"

Silas didn't say anything. He just stood there, looking at them.

"Nothing to say?" Feng asked.

"You aren't my brother," he said.

Feng laughed. "Not by birth, no. We all took an oath, Talon. Don't you remember? No, you don't. If you had remembered it from the beginning, we wouldn't be here now."

"It was already broken," Silas said. "*He* broke it."

"Your son was Cursed, Talon. *He* didn't make it happen. You did what you had to do.

Blaming *him*, or the Overlord isn't going to help anything."

Silas shook his head. "You don't know?" he asked.

"Know what?" Feng replied.

"The Curse. It's a sickness. Aren wasn't born with it. He gave it to him." He motioned at the Overlord. "He injected it into him, to make him sick."

Eryn couldn't believe it. She was sick? She remembered Malik's journal. Was that what would happen to her? She felt the fear starting to overwhelm her, and she forced herself to be calm. Silas needed her right now.

"Is it true?" Feng asked Iolis.

The Overlord nodded. "It's true. But don't you think *he* had *his* reasons, Feng?"

Silas looked at the swordsman, his eyes pleading. Feng looked back and forth between him and the Overlord.

"I'm sorry, Talon," he said at last. "Your grief has overcome you, and your loyalty has fled if you don't believe there was a good reason for what *he* did. *He* didn't break the oath. You did."

Silas lowered his head, still shaking it. "Why would *he* want Aren dead, when *he* has a cure?"

Eryn's heart lifted. A cure? She didn't have to wind up like Malik. It was a sickness they could fix.

"I'm sure there is a good reason, Talon. Have you ever thought that your son was a rebel, a traitor? That he was trying to undermine all of the hard work we've done?"

Silas' head shot up. "He knew. The truth that I refused to see. The truth that you refuse to see." He looked at the Overlord. "Freeze me, Mediator. Hold my body so that you can end my

life. If you don't, I'm going to kill you."

The Overlord smiled, and held out his hand. Eryn could see a gold stone sitting on top of an iridium ring. "*He's* given me permission to kill you, Talon. It didn't come easily, but I talked *him* into it."

Eryn's heart jumped into her throat. The Overlord was Cursed? She had to do something, or he was going to kill Silas.

She saw the stone on the ring begin to glow. Silas' sword came up, and he hopped forward, a quick slash intended to cut Iolis' finger off. Feng's blade met his, and batted it away.

"Don't make him do this, brother," Feng said. "We can work it out. It's all been a misunderstanding."

Silas was the one laughing now. "A misunderstanding? He killed him!" He went for the Overlord again, but Feng intervened. He blocked two quick thrusts and went on the offensive.

Eryn closed her eyes and tried to picture the bellows. She couldn't bring it to mind over the cracking of the blades, in a pattern so fast she could barely believe the two men could follow one another well enough to avoid being cut.

She gave up on it, and focused on her breathing. She didn't have much time.

Clang, clang, clang, the swords smacked together at a dizzying pace. If she had opened her eyes, she would have seen Silas and Feng dancing around the room, twirling and slashing, parrying and thrusting. They were both Generals, both masters of war and battle. Brothers of a sort, according to Feng.

She took hold of the sound in her mind. The rhythm of metal on metal, like the hammer folding iron on the forge. She found her place there, and began to feel the tingle between her ears.

"Enough," she heard the Overlord say. She could sense the power feeding out of him and into the ring. She could feel it amplified by the stone and pushed at Silas. A moment later, the fighting stopped.

She fought to hold onto her own power, and hoped that the Overlord was too concerned with Silas to notice her. She kept the ringing of the blades in her memory, held it tight and kept it beating away, feeling more energy rushing into her body, pooling throughout her limbs.

She had sped herself up once, to save them from the monsters of the Rushes. She said the word then, hearing it escape her lips at hyper speed.

"Incitat."

She opened her eyes. As she expected, Silas was frozen, held by the Overlord's power. Feng was frozen too, or at least he seemed that way, stuck in a slowness of time that she had either created, or escaped. The Overlord was equally trapped, as were the two soldiers, who had come running at the sound of the fighting.

She ran down the steps, bending over to pick up her sword on the way down. Her head was starting to hurt, and she could feel the blood running from both eyes. She couldn't hold this for long.

She went for the Overlord. If she killed him, his power over Silas would cease. She ran right up in front of him, drawing back her sword and pushing it forward, to stab him in the stomach.

He moved.

He stepped to the side, and grabbed her wrist, squeezing it so hard she dropped the blade. It fell so slowly, it was almost as though it was floating in the air. At the same time, the glow from the ring faded.

"You?" he said, surprised. "You're a child, and you created a distortion field?" He held her wrist, looking down at her, fear and blood in his eyes.

"I did what I had to do. I'm not going to let you kill Silas." She struggled against his grip, trying to shake herself free. Her headache was getting stronger.

"It took me twelve years to make a distortion field," he said. He held her while he leaned over and grabbed her discarded blade.

"Let me go," she cried. She bent her head down and tried to bite him, but he tugged her off-balance.

"You're the reason *he* kills our kind," the Overlord said, his anger obvious. He lifted the sword up, but Eryn could tell he was straining to do it. "Cursed like you can't be allowed to live, if you refuse to be loyal."

His voice, and his grip were weakening. Eryn was feeling dizzy herself, her eyes blurring while she looked at him.

"Loyal? How do you expect loyalty, when you murder people's families?"

She tugged her wrist again, and this time it came free. The Overlord fell to his knees, the blood pouring from his eyes so quickly that it created a regular trickle to the floor.

"You don't understand," he said. "It has to be this way. You don't know what you're doing." The sword fell from his grip, back towards the floor, the distortion causing it to move ever so slowly.

"I know what I'm doing." Eryn walked over and took the hilt, feeling her power beginning to fade, along with her consciousness. The Overlord watched her, leaning on his hands to stay upright, his entire face red with blood. She raised the sword up, to stab down into his back, and then saw that he had frozen.

The Overlord would be too weak to hold Silas again, and she only had seconds, she knew, before her power was gone. She twisted around and plunged her sword into Feng's stomach. She felt a hint of guilt and sadness at it, because he had at least seemed like an honorable man, but he had become the biggest threat.

She let go of the hilt, and fell to the floor.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SIX

Silas

Silas had known from the time he had woken from his memories that the only way he would be able to defeat the Overlord was with Eryn's help. What he hadn't known was if she would be able to do it.

When Iolis had frozen him, he believed his life was over, his mission to find justice for Aren, and all of the Cursed, failed. He stood with his muscles locked in position with Feng and the Overlord looking at him, his brother prepared to sink his blade into his chest.

It was another forgotten memory, remembered when he saw the man. Feng had once been his Lieutenant, his strategist and confidant. After the battle in Neder, he had been promoted to General Errant, a roaming leader who traveled where he was needed. They were brothers, not in blood but in deed. They had sworn an oath, he and Feng, along with the others from his generation, along with *him*. Loyalty, honesty, brotherhood, with loyalty foremost above all else. There was nothing loyal in *his* deception, regardless of what Feng had decided. Fighting him had been a painful sadness. Falling to him a humiliation.

Then, something had happened. Silas found he could move. His body fell forward as it was let go of the Overlord's power. Feng was still next to him, but he was doubled over on the ground, a sword point protruding through his back. Eryn's sword.

Eryn was there, on the ground, her face laying towards him, almost peaceful despite the blood that coated it. The Overlord was behind her, on his hands and knees and looking up at him

with dull, weak eyes.

He heard the metal boots of the soldiers approaching. He turned and slipped his blade past one's guard, and then the other, putting deep slashes into their abdomens before they even knew they had been attacked. They both fell while he turned back to Iolis.

"Talon," the Overlord said. "I was there. The day Aren died. I killed him. I cut off his head."

Silas looked down on him.

"Murderer," he whispered.

He could hear the crowd outside. The murmurs, the cries, the hisses and hushes. He could feel the pent up anger and frustration in the air. He knew the assembled masses had heard the fighting inside. He knew that they would be wondering what was happening, as would the gathered soldiers who had never been summoned to an alarm that had never been raised.

He walked towards the open doors that led out to the balcony, his bare feet slippery from the blood that had run beneath them. Red footprints trailed in his wake, a shedding of pain and sorrow.

As he grew closer to the balcony, he could see out past the palace walls, to the city below. He was surprised by the fires he spied in the background, and the distant echoes of shouting and battle. Before that moment, he'd have had no way to know what he had started in Elling, just by being present in the city. He'd have had no way to know how many had answered Atticus' call.

The walk felt like it took him forever. He was tired, and sore, and more than a little worried about the girl he had left behind, resting on the floor, the Overlord's cloak covering her and keeping her warm. He had found the beginnings of the thread of memories that had been stolen from him, and with it a measure of vengeance for the wife and son that had been stolen, but he still had one more thing to do.

When he reached the balcony, he placed his left hand upon the railing, to hold himself up. He looked down at the citizens of Elling. He looked down at the soldiers gathered there to conduct the searches and keep the crowds in line. They looked back at him, confused, scared, upset.

He found the bowmen on the walls across from him. They had a clear line of sight, and were well within range, yet they held and waited. They could see what was going on outside the walls. It was easy to be loyal when you were in control.

He took a deep breath.

"My name is Silas Morningstar," he said, his voice booming across the courtyard. "Many years ago, I was known as Talon Rast, General of the Northern Armies. I fought for *him*, killed for *him*, murdered your sons and daughters for *him*."

He paused, waiting to see how the crowd would react. They stood silent, staring up at him, their faces a mixture of shock, anger, and uncertainty.

"I came out here to apologize to you. To pledge myself to you. To promise you my dedication in bringing an end to *his* dark empire. I have brought you a gift, a token of my vow. The rebellion has started, here in Elling. It will finish when I reach *his* gates, and squeeze the life from *him* with these hands."

He lifted both of his hands then, his body unsteady on tired legs. A gasp rippled through

the throng.

Silas drew back his right hand, threw the head of Overlord Iolis out into the courtyard below, turned, and walked away.

The crowd erupted in chaos.

CHAPTER THIRTY-SEVEN

Epilogue

They found the hidden room under a pile of dirt and burned out timber; the remains of the home where Aren and Kaelyn Rast had once lived. It had taken almost a month of searching, first to find the lost village of Addletown, and then to locate the proper house. Plenty of sweat had been shed over the tasks of digging, lifting, and sweeping wood, leaves, ash, and earth.

"Are you sure this is it?" Eryn asked. She stood next to Silas, joining him in looking down on the solid block of stone.

"It must be," Silas said. "Only a Cursed could move this door."

He smiled at the statement. In the end, his son had outsmarted them all. They had given him the Curse, the sickness, in order to get rid of his thorn in their sides and keep their General loyal. In the end, Aren had used it both to protect the secrets he held most dear, and to stick them with an even bigger thorn. He would have made a fine General in his own right.

"My back is killing me," Robar said, sitting on the grass behind them with his wife.

"Be quiet," Sena said.

"Can you move it?" Silas asked.

Ever since she had woken from the drain and fever caused by pushing the Curse, her power, so hard, Eryn had seemed to gain a measure of greater control over it. Not only had she remembered the effects of her last use, the 'distortion field' as the Overlord had named it, but since then she had been able to bring small amounts of the power forth almost without thinking.

Eryn nodded. She closed her eyes and spread her hands with her palms facing up.

"Leva," she said.

The huge block of stone rattled, and then shifted, lifting out of its place and coming to rest on the ground. The movement revealed a ladder down into the darkness.

It had been nearly three months since Silas and Eryn had defeated the Overlord. The summer of discontent had moved into autumn, and the city of Elling stood as a bastion of hope for the rest of the Empire, as a city where Cursed and their families could come and be safe from *his* reach.

It hadn't come without cost. The relative peace had been preceded by two bloody months of fighting; first against the soldiers and loyalists living in Elling, and then against additional forces that had been ordered to the region.

Based on skill alone, it might have been a slaughter, but *he* had lost a General, while the rebels had gained one. They also had overwhelming numbers on their side, with more able-bodied men and women finding their way to Elling every day.

Silas' simple act of defiance had been a spark on fine tinder, lighting a flame left smoldering for years. The victory in Elling had given their part of the Empire something it hadn't had in a long time - hope. Word would spread of *his* defeat, and the nascent rebellions throughout the Empire would only grow larger and more bold, and perhaps, just perhaps, in time they would keep *him* too busy to send an army to Elling that was large enough to crush it, instead spreading *his* forces thin enough that victory might somehow be possible.

That was Silas' hope, and he held onto it, for he knew the days of darkness in *his* empire would not be so easily vanished. For one thing, there was the Curse, a disease that Aren had said would kill most of those who had it within a few years' time. A disease that *he* knew how to cure,

or at least hold at bay. Iolis had been Cursed for fourteen years or more. Not only had he not succumbed to it, but Constable Penticott had been right; the Mediator's body seemed as young as it had been in Silas' memory.

He glanced over at Eryn, who had walked over to the ladder and held out her hand.

"Ignus," she said.

A small ball of bright white light appeared in her palm, and she turned it over and let it go. She watched it float down into the darkness, bringing light to Aren's secrets.

Eryn wasn't immune to the effects of the Curse. She would die along with any other who had or would develop the disease if they didn't find *him*, or at least *his* cure. That was more than enough reason for Silas to seek *him*, but he also had the promise he had made to the people of Elling.

It would be no easy task, for there was no one, not even *his* Overlords, or *his* Generals, who knew where *he* was. Their commands were delivered to them through large, round, black stones placed in the high towers of the provincial capital palaces, and were passed into the field either by messenger, or through the use of the strange iridium discs. Silas had hoped capturing the palace would allow them to eavesdrop on *his* communications, but the stone they had found in the eastern tower had crumbled within a week of the Overlord's death.

"Come on, old man," Eryn said. She stood at the top of the ladder, her legs already on the top rungs.

Silas walked over, and they climbed down, one after the other. He hadn't known what to expect when he reached the bottom. Nothing could have prepared him for what he found.

The room was long and narrow, with just enough space for a single person to walk down the center between a matched pair of wooden counters that rested against each side of the room.

On the left counter, a number of glass vials rested in racks, with many of the vials containing dark red liquid beneath cork stoppers. Silas was sure it was blood.

Next to the vials sat an odd contraption that Silas didn't recognize or understand. It was made of wood and metal and glass, with two tubes that faced downward, spaced apart as though they were meant to be looked through. A raised tray rested in the center, on which sat another piece of glass with a drop of blood smeared onto it.

On the opposite counter were three books, all laying closed, a quill, and a dried up inkwell, along with rows of colored stones, each with a label underneath.

Floating above them was the small, bright ball of light, the light that Eryn had created.

"I don't understand any of this," Silas said.

Eryn put her hand to the book closest to the quill, and opened the cover. Inside rested a few loose sheets of paper. She glanced at them, and then held them out.

Silas took them from her, and began to read.

Father,

I write this letter with the greatest hope that you will one day hold it in your hands, read these words I have written, and understand why events have unfolded the way they have. There is so much I would like to say, so much I wish I could have said, but I fear my time is short.

There are three books in this room. The first, closest to the quill, is my translation of the ancient language to our own, so that when you come across this writing that predates his Empire, you will be able to read it. There are truths within this language that he wants none to see, and he has gone as far as to send special soldiers out to find any and all such texts.

The second is an ancient text I stole from the furnace in the Elling library, describing

methods of science that predate the Empire, and referencing an amazing tool which allows you to look very closely at things that are invisible to our eyes. I have reconstructed such a tool based on the principles described, though I fear it is a poor facsimile. Even so, it has allowed me to confirm my suspicions.

The third is a journal of the research I have done to determine the exact nature of the Curse, which I will briefly outline here.

My studies have shown that what makes up the Curse is a living thing, a creature of some kind that survives in our blood, thriving on those very things which bring us life. Through the use of the tool, I have discovered that these creatures are in every single bit of water that covers the Empire, from river to raindrop, and therefor in every single one of us. Yet in most cases it sleeps, and never wakes.

For others, the Cursed, the creature is woken by the changes that occur between childhood and adulthood. It begins a process of reproducing, at rates that differ from one individual to the next. I believe that it continues this reproduction until its numbers become so great that they ruin the host's blood, and kill them.

In between their waking, and the Cursed's death, a relationship can develop between the creatures and their host. The forming of this relationship is unique to each person, but the end result is that the host can enter a state of communication with these creatures, and make use of a strange power they seem to have to be able to affect the very nature of the world around them in a way that I cannot understand. I have created a word, 'magic', to describe this relationship, for lack of any better description.

It is based on this information that I have tried to create a cure of my own and find a way to kill these creatures. I have failed. He has the cure, I know it. The Mediators live, and they are

all Cursed. I believe the Overlords may be as well.

You might wonder why this matters so much to me, and why I have pursued this information with every ounce of my soul. At first, I sought only knowledge of the past. I didn't question his rule, or his decisions. I wanted only to learn all there was to learn. My curiosity got the better of me, and I became determined to read the books that we were ordered to destroy. It was this path that led me towards understanding, and ultimately will mean my death.

I could have accepted that. I never would have made this place, or studied the Curse to save my own life. I did it to save my daughter.

Kaelyn gave birth only a week ago. She is a healthy girl, but I fear that the risk of her being Cursed is high. Kaelyn became pregnant after I was infected with the woken creatures, but before I knew what had happened. I have worked so hard these months to find the cure, so she might never have the Curse, and might never die from it, either at his hand, or through the course of the disease.

I've heard that you have sent soldiers and a Mediator to come and take me. If you're reading this, I'm sure you've already seen the note I left with the innkeeper in Heathers. I want to tell you again that I forgive you. I pray that, Amman willing, you find this place in time to save her. I question if I should have told you of her in that letter, but I feared the innkeeper's trustworthiness and was not willing to risk her life.

You know him. Please, go to him. Ask him for the cure, and if he will not give it willingly, take it from him. For the sake of your granddaughter, and every other child and grandchild who he allows to perish if they do not meet his needs.

Once you have the cure, find her. I'm to bring her to a village not far from here, a place called Watertown. There is a blacksmith there, who helped me to fashion the parts for the tool.

Seek him out, and ask after his girl.

Please.

I beg you.

- Aren

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Thank you again!

To My Own Love,
Who thankfully is not lost.
You continue to be my inspiration.

About the Author

I grew up with books. When I was eleven, I used to ride my bicycle three miles to the nearest bookstore to check the shelves for any new science fiction or fantasy titles they may have added in the last week, and eagerly put down almost all of my paper route money for the pleasure of escaping to a different place.

It's hard to be an avid reader without wanting to create worlds of your own, and so that's what I then set out to do. Too many years later, it's a dream come true to be published, and have people read and enjoy my work.

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